

ERASMUS 2017- UNIVERSITE DE PARIS DESCARTES (PARIS V)

Choosing the European Option

The European Studies Programme was one of the factors that attracted me to study at Manchester as other medical schools in the country did not offer anything similar. I enjoyed learning French in school and I did not want to lose it when I started university. I can say that after doing the 4 month Erasmus placement, I am happy with my decision.

The weekly classes at Manchester helped me maintain my French at a satisfactory level and even though attending classes after placement and learning medical French vocabulary was tedious at times, it helped to prepare me for Erasmus. Doing Year 3 PEP abroad was also a great opportunity to develop my language skills and it provided a taster of what Erasmus would be like. When it came to choosing where we wanted to go after finals, I knew that it had to be Paris. Paris is an incredible city, and I could not wait for the opportunity to live there for 4 months. I got allocated to Paris Descartes University, which was a great choice for me as all their teaching hospitals are in the centre of Paris.

Living in Paris

Travel

Travelling to Paris after finals was very exciting, it felt like the closing of one chapter and the beginning of another. I travelled by plane from Manchester Airport; booking my airline tickets relatively early allowed me to get a return ticket for around 100 pounds. I believe that you can get advance Eurostar tickets for a lot cheaper, but I did not want to travel to London first. If that is not a problem for you, it is worth considering as you are not limited on how much luggage you can carry which is crucial for a 4 month stay. On arrival in Paris, I took the RER B from Charles de Gaulle Airport to Paris Gare du Nord. The train ticket costs 10 euros, which is much better than taking a cab to central Paris that will set you back around 60 euros. From there you can get an Uber or taxi to your accommodation which will not be very expensive.

For travelling around Paris, get yourself a Navigo card which costs 73 euros per month, it starts at the beginning of the month so it is best to get it on the 1st. Do not get one at the end of the month because it will only last for a few days. Keep your receipt because you can take this to the Human resources department at your hospital to get reimbursed half of the cost every month. This card covers travel on metro, bus, tram, and RER. If you like to cycle, there are the Velib bikes, you pay 29 euros for unlimited use for a year. I would also recommend walking as much as you can because it is the best way to discover the city.

Accommodation

I lived in an Airbnb flat with 2 friends from Manchester doing Erasmus in Paris as well. We managed to find a 3-bedroom apartment in the 18th arrondissement in an area called La Chapelle. La Chapelle is a vibrant multicultural area in the north of Paris. It is not your typical Parisian neighbourhood but we had everything we needed at our doorstep; a metro and bus stop right outside, many supermarkets, pharmacies, food market etc. Personally, I enjoyed the freedom of living in my own apartment over student halls, but this is entirely dependent on preference. The only rule I would give is make sure you do your research beforehand and secure a place to stay before you get to Paris. Do not live it to chance because you can end up paying a lot more money for somewhere that is not very nice. With regards to who you decide to live with, I was happy with my decision to live with friends from Manchester because we got to support each other especially in the first few weeks

when everything was new and we always had each other to do fun stuff with. However, if you decide to do the same, do not let this limit you to socialising with only your friends from Manchester, go out there and meet new people and immerse yourself in the French culture as much as you can. If you prefer to live in student halls like CROUS or Cite Universitaire, the university will send you more information before you get to Paris. As a student in Paris, you can get money off your accommodation with the CAF, if you want to take advantage of this, make sure you sort this out as soon as possible because most administrative processes in France are rather slow compared to the UK.

Food

During my time in Paris, my flatmates and I cooked a lot of our meals which worked out a lot cheaper than eating out. We did grocery shopping at supermarkets like Monoprix, Franprix and Lidl. The hospital canteen is also great for lunch, for 2.3 euros you can get salad, bread, a main meal, and dessert. You cannot pay in cash, you must buy a booklet of tickets normally sold in 10s or 20s from the cashier's office at your hospital. I think this is a good deal and you get to try out a variety of foods every day. When it comes to eating out Paris has A LOT of choice, I would strongly recommend doing some research before you go somewhere because not every brasserie is good or worth the money. By checking out reviews online, you can find some nice, non-touristy spots with good food. Some of my favourite French treats were the baguettes and the wine.

Money

Paris is known to be an expensive city but if you are clever with your cash you can get by just fine. Apart from not eating out all the time, you can save money on activities by doing things that are free for students and those under the age of 26. Always travel with your student card or some form of ID to benefit from this. In general, bars and hang out spots north of the river Seine (Rive-Droit) tend to be cheaper than places south of the river (Rive-Gauche) so check out the neighbourhoods there. Also, when the weather gets better, having a picnic in the park or on the banks of the River Seine, will not cost you anything.

Open a bank account in your first week so that you can give your bank details to the Human resources department at your hospital to be paid the monthly salary of 200 euros. It also helps to have the French debit card because you can withdraw money from ATMs for no charge. Seventy percent of the Erasmus grant comes in shortly after your arrival in Paris. I would advise using the Cash Passport to pay for things because you will be charged 3.50 euros every time you use it to withdraw money.

Safety

Paris, like any other big city, can be unsafe. This is nothing to worry about, just be more careful in certain situations. For example, during rush hour when the metro is full, do not keep your backpack behind you or your handbag open as there are pickpockets. When you are sitting on one of the famous Parisian terraces, keep your phone and valuables off the table and make sure your bag is secure as these can quickly be taken by a passer-by.

My hospital placements

On our first day in Paris, we went to the International Students office at the university to register for the semester and hand in all the required documents. I would urge students to prepare all the

documents while in Manchester because it will be a hassle to get these when you are already in Paris. You should also come with a few passport photos as you will need these for a lot of different things.

I decided to do both my placements at Cochin hospital which is in the 14th arrondissement of Paris, a very central location with lots of sites around it, including the famous Jardin de Luxembourg a few minutes' walk away. I took the RER B from Gare du Nord everyday which was quick but very full of commuters every morning.

My first placement was in Obstetrics and Gynaecology. As everyone says, it is not a given that they will be expecting you, especially so for the first placement because you will be joining students who have already been there for 2 months. However, do not be afraid, find out where you need to go, introduce yourself and all will be well, they are used to having Erasmus students. Speak to your fellow "externes" (medical students) as they will give you lots of useful information and help you get your bearings. In this placement, there was a student rota with time being split between emergency, theatre, wards, consultations, etc. The externes oversaw this so they incorporated me into the rota and I knew where I needed to be each week and what my role would be. The first thing I noticed was the amount of responsibility that the medical students have, not just responsibility for patients but also for a lot of administrative tasks.

While in the emergency unit, I was responsible for seeing patients first; taking a history, examining them, and handing this over to the "interne" (junior doctor) who would then finish off the examination and come up with a management plan. Whilst on the wards, I had an early start at 7 am to start the ward round, go for the daily staff meeting and then return to the wards to do the jobs. These included preparing discharge documents, signing papers for sick leave, chasing blood results etc. Being on the wards was not a very good medical learning experience so I did not really enjoy it. Theatre was an interesting experience, my role was to prepare the surgical instruments and pass these to the surgeons during the operation, so I had to learn the names of the instruments in French, let alone I did not even know their names in English! With a bit of preparation, it was not a total disaster, so do not be afraid when such daunting tasks are presented to you, just prepare as well as you can, and admit what you do not know.

My second placement was in Internal Medicine at Cochin. It was much better to start at the same time as everyone else, as we were all new, we got a proper induction and I felt more included. This placement was also better organised and because I was based on the same ward for the whole time, I got to really settle into my role and learn as much as I could. We had formal teaching sessions three times a week and a few bedside teaching sessions with our consultant, which are a very rare occurrence in France.

Internal Medicine in France is a very interesting speciality for which there is no equivalent in the UK. I saw a variety of patients with different presentations, some who raised diagnostic challenges for which a careful history taking and examination had to be done, followed by complex investigations like electrophoresis, parasite serology, auto-antibodies, and biopsies. They mostly covered the specialities of Haematology, Rheumatology, and Infectious Diseases. This was a great learning experience for me as it challenged me to improve my history taking skills and get better at interpreting various investigations. There is a relatively big population of homeless people in Paris, this was evident in the number of patients we saw who would come in off the street very unwell. Being a very multicultural city, I also saw illnesses that I had not seen much of during my experience in the UK such as TB and AIDS.

There was also the opportunity to learn new skills such as skin biopsies, lumbar punctures and ascitic taps. As medical students, we could perform these for the first time on patients with supervision from the interne, which is something you would not get to do in the UK. I would highly recommend choosing a placement in internal medicine during Erasmus as it is great revision post-finals, very hands on and interesting and generally well structured.

From speaking to other Erasmus students, the best placements to do for the learning experience are medical ones such as Accident and Emergency (Urgences) and ICU (Reanimation).

Comparing medicine in the UK and France

Although the medical culture in the UK and France share a lot of similarities, there are many key differences.

In France, they still maintain a very paternalistic relationship between doctor and patient and this may shock you after four and a half years of communication skills teaching! The doctor is always right, and the patient's ideas, concerns and expectations are not really at the forefront of the consultation. As a result, the patients expect this relationship as the norm and generally do not complain about it. I had a consultant who would speak to patients like she was speaking to a little child, telling them off at times for not doing what she said. However, I did see some junior doctors with good communication skills so perhaps this may change in the future. The doctors also tend to be more direct in giving information to the patients, as a result, the patients themselves seemed to be more aware of their health problems and their management.

One of the better aspects of the French medical culture is the students are included as part of the team. Even though we were only on the wards from 9am to 1pm, we spent our time doing actual work, whether it was clerking patients, documenting patients' clinical evolution, dealing with paper work etc. This felt more fulfilling as the doctors relied on you and you got to know your patients very well. However, a lot of this was independent work, so sometimes students are not sure whether they are doing the right thing, especially when it comes to clinical examination. I noticed that even though they had a lot of medical knowledge, their clinical examination skills were not as good. One final year student even told me that she had never been observed carrying out a clinical examination in all her years in medical school which is a contrast to our focus on OSCE assessment in Manchester. On the other hand, they put a lot more emphasis on in depth medical knowledge than we do in Manchester. The consultants would ask a lot of questions which we were expected to know the answers to. These ranged from physiology, semiology, diagnoses, management etc. Many of the students spent their afternoons and evenings after placement revising in the library for their "partielles." These are written exams that they do at the end of each term. The final year students do an exam called the "concours" which determines what specialty training they can do and which region they will work in.

Another difference between the two countries is that in France they use brand names of medication and very rarely use generic names. This was especially confusing in the beginning, as a simple drug like Aspirin was called something completely different. However, after some time you get used to the names. Keeping a log of the medications I would come across helped me to memorise the names. It also helps to keep a log of other new medical words you hear, especially abbreviations which are used a lot.

Linguistic Development

Before starting the placements, I was very nervous about my French speaking abilities. Despite having passed my B2 and C1 exams, I still felt like I had a lot of work to do and the best way is always to fully immerse yourself in the language.

Clerking patients on my own in the gynaecology emergency department was the first step. Even though I was nervous about this, following a history taking structure helped me not worry too much about missing things or making mistakes. All the patients were very understanding of the fact that French was not my first language, which put me at ease as well. Documentation was slightly harder though; I had to get used to the French computer keyboard and I made a lot of grammar and spelling mistakes which my interne would correct.

My internal medicine placement introduced a new hurdle in my language skills, presentations. On the days we had ward rounds, we would present our patients to the consultants. This was a very important occasion, as even the French medical students would prepare notes for this. The first time I presented a patient, I was so nervous, this got easier but it was always a slightly terrifying task for me. One of my consultants used to help me with this, and she would ask me to restructure my sentences, be more concise etc. I appreciated her constructive feedback. I was also a lot friendlier with my co-externes during this placement so they would help me a lot when I had questions or needed something translated. We would have lunch together and chat which was also nice.

Outside of the hospital, my general French language skills improved too. Outside of the Erasmus circle, I made a few friends with whom I would speak to in only French, learning more colloquial terms as well. Also, regular activities like grocery shopping, going to the cinema etc. presented opportunities to learn something new.

The Erasmus Experience

Paris is a haven for international students, they come from all over the world for a semester or year abroad. Many students come from the United States, Canada, South America, Italy, Scandinavia etc. As a result, a few organisations have been formed to organise events and trips for international students in Paris. Some of these organisations include EIAP and To-be-Erasmus-In-Paris. The events included skip the queue museum visits, walking tours, nights out etc. Every other weekend there is a trip to other regions or cities in France and Europe. The trips are by coach, and the price includes accommodation as well, so they work out cheaper than organising your own trip. You also get some free time to explore while you are there. These trips allow you to visit places in a short amount of time, however you do not get enough time to fully enjoy the place as you are always on the move. A few trips I went on were Belgium and Cote d'Azur where we visited St Tropez, Cannes, Nice and Monaco. I would recommend visiting other towns in France like Normandy, Champagne, Bordeaux. This allows you to see another side of the country and it is nice to escape the busy life in Paris for a weekend away especially in May which has several bank holidays. However, if you feel like the Erasmus student lifestyle is not for you, do not be afraid do your own thing or even better, meet and socialise with locals instead.

More tips.

- Make sure you get a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) before you leave Manchester, otherwise you will have to pay over 200 euros to get insured in France. International Students are eligible for the card as well, find out how you can get it online.

- It is worth getting a French sim card while you are there, companies such as RED by SFR, Free and Bouygues telecom offer good deals on calls, texts, and data.
- There is no need to bring formal clothes for the hospital, the dress code is casual with a white coat on top.
- Vous vous vous! The French are very particular about the correct use of “Tu” and “Vous.” As a rule, use vous for all your patients and consultants, shop attendants and people on public transport.
- Do not say “Bonjour” or “Salut” to someone several times in a day, it is considered rude! If you do see them again later you can use “Ca va?” or “Rebonjour!”
- Your most important contact before and during your time in Paris is a lovely lady who oversees the administrative side of the Erasmus programme at the university. Below are her contact details:

Erichetta MAZÉRAT

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Conclusion

Overall, the four-month experience in Paris was valuable for my personal development; academically and culturally. The ability to communicate and work in another language is something that I have worked on for a long time and I am proud to have achieved. I am open to the idea of living and working in a French speaking country, whether this is in France or elsewhere in the Francophone world. For now, I am focussing on completing the Foundation Programme in the UK, later, the world is my oyster!