

ERASMUS 2014
PARIS V – UNIVERSITE PARIS DESCARTES

Why you chose to study on the European Studies programme?

The European Studies Programme was a clear choice from the start of Manchester and a motivator for applying. I had done French A Level, been an au pair in my gap year, enjoyed the French culture and did not want to give that up. Plus the idea of a four month placement rather than two after finals was very tempting – turns out this is not remotely a decision I regret making. My Erasmus placement has been one of the best experiences of my life and certainly one I couldn't recommend more thoroughly.

An overview of my experience of Paris

Halls of accommodation:

I was fortunate to be given a place in a hall of residence in the 5th arrondissement of Paris, situated just opposite Jardin de Luxembourg. Turning up I had no idea what to expect. I walked into a slightly monstrous looking building, picked up my keys (having filled in more than a small amount of paperwork and provided a multitude of documents) and took the lift up to the 8th floor. The corridor looked like a bizarre hotel, I walked into my room to find a little studio. It has been essentially perfect – a 14 meters squared room, containing a miniature kitchen, en suite bathroom, large wardrobe, bed and table. That information is perhaps a little dull, the best part of the room is its view, which among many things looks onto the Eiffel Tower, les invalides, the Grand Palais and if I look to the left I spot le sacre Coeur. I am not sure you could get a better tourist spot – it is almost like a penthouse view. The cost of the room is just over 500 Euros a month, but with CAF (to be explained later) the cost was nearer 250 Euros – which was far less than I paid in Manchester for a wonderful but perhaps not as magical house.

The residence itself I was slightly disappointed with at first, I had heard that French halls were not as sociable as those in the UK, but owing to the fact that each individual has a studio, it meant that crossing people was even more limited. To this day I still do not know who my neighbours are. However, I would like to reassure you that I have made some amazing friends in my halls – met through a concoction of ways, in the lift, at a university welcome event etc.

There is also a communal kitchen here, but they aren't really used. Practicalities wise – I asked ahead about what was contained in the room (not a lot), which meant I could bring over the necessities rather than buying them again. On that note I came over on eurostar and bought an extra bad, which you can pick up at any point you want, which although meant another trip back to Gare de Nord, in the long run saved me a lot of money.

Travelling around:

I spent my first few weeks wandering aimlessly, hospital was a twenty five minute walk away and so I tended to do that only taking the bus on the odd occasion that it rained. Then I discovered the velib – these are like London's Boris bikes. I have found them amazing – quicker than public transport usually, cheaper and a great way to explore Paris. A year subscription costs approximately thirty Euros and for that you can use the bikes unlimited for forty-five minutes at a time. Many people ask if I am frightened of cycling Paris streets and it is fair to say you need to be careful, but have as a general rule found the Parisian drivers to be very accommodating and there are many cycle lanes. Therefore even if cycling isn't your thing, try it out on some quieter streets. I rarely use the metro, when I do I buy the one use tickets which are just under 2 Euros a pop. Otherwise you can buy a monthly pass at the start of the month, which costs sixty Euros – most hospitals will reimburse half of your transport costs. So all in all transport is pretty cheap.

Free time

Paris is an amazing city. The reason I chose it was I decided that even if by some chance I met absolutely no one, I would still be able to keep myself occupied on a daily basis. Firstly Paris is beautiful, you can entertain yourself by wandering for hours on end. Art and museums are plentiful and if you are under twenty five then they are largely free. Exhibitions are usually paid for – but you can sign up for a years pass at the Centre Pompidou which cost twenty Euros and gets you in too all they have to offer.

For all things going on Paris lebonbon blog has it. It is clear that Paris is expensive – perhaps similar to London, but you can equally find a good deal and this blog certainly helps. Paris hosts a range of fun areas to go out/have dinner – for the cheaper ones Republique/ Bastille/ Oberkampf are great. I attended one Erasmus party and quickly decided that that was not my thing – too many twenty year olds, but some people love it.

I did a couple of little weekend trips. A particular highlight was Bordeaux – a beautiful place. If you think that you might, then you can buy a youth rail card, which costs about fifty Euros, but you usually get a decent amount of travel and I have definitely made it worth while.

Eating

Food is perhaps the thing I have found most expensive in Paris – the supermarkets are very expensive. Haven't really found a way around that, Dia is the cheapest supermarket. Otherwise going to markets and getting food there, whilst not always cheaper does tend to be better quality. Restaurants as a general rule are pretty good. The hospitals tend to have canteens, which in my experience have been pretty decent and quite cheap, also can provide a nice time to eat with other medical students who tend to otherwise disappear pretty quickly to their afternoon lessons.

The university – Paris Descartes

I have to say having read a lot about bad organization of previous placements, my transition was pretty effortless. The first day I turned up and saw the Erasmus coordinator, she sorted out student cards etc and the second day I went to hospital. I will admit when I turned up the chef de service wasn't entirely expecting me, however he quickly explained he received over three hundred emails a day, so I wasn't surprised I had fallen through the loop.

My university organized welcome drinks, which was a nice way to meet some other students. There were also other events such as a debating evening, which was fun. For the university myself and another Manchester student got to help interview prospective students wanting to do Erasmus in Manchester, which I enjoyed doing.

My hospital placements

First thing to say is that hospital dress is very different in France and from what I can gather most of Europe than in England. The usual attire is very casual, trainers and jeans are perfectly acceptable, and indeed most of the consultants wear them. Topped off nicely with a white coat. This made quite a nice change.

Placement 1: NECKER PEDIATRICS GASTROHEPATOLOGY

My first placement was at Necker, which is France's equivalent of Great Ormond Street; very smart, very well equipped and hyper specialized. I originally chose this placement as I thought I wanted to do peds. I had changed my mind about it before I got to Paris, but decided this was a good opportunity to make sure. I have to say this placement went with highs and lows.

First of all the routine, I had to be there for eight thirty am and left usually by 1pm. In the morning we had to fill in the patient records with blood results, observations etc, then we saw our patients either alone or with the junior doctor. Other times in the week there were staff meetings (often very very long) where we had to do power point presentations of patients, ward rounds in which we had to

present our patients and histology meeting.

The positives – it was exceptionally interesting at times and I certainly got to see many rare diseases, which I have never seen before and do not expect to see again. Presenting patients on a weekly basis was not only good for my French, but also my presentation skills and I certainly do not feel scared about doing it in English again. I met some nice people, although perhaps they weren't quite as friendly as I was hoping. You get paid for your placement and it is only in the morning so I could enjoy the afternoon.

The negatives – the placement was long, ten weeks to be precise, I felt that after the first month I had really learnt all that I could considering it was such a specialized service. My service also offered very little flexibility, the routine was pretty monotonous at times and we weren't allowed to go to consultations, which I think would have been a good learning opportunity. It would have been really interesting to also visit other departments.

All that said it was interesting, but I am not sure I would pick it again as a placement, owing to how specialized it was.

PLACEMENT 2: INSTITUTE MONTSOURIS MEDECINE INTERNE

As soon as I arrived at my second placement I could tell already it was more for me. The ward vibe was more relaxed; there were more students and the cases more varied. Medecine Interne is a specialty which doesn't really exist in the UK – which is a shame as if it does I would choose it. It is essentially a diagnostic specialty, which encompasses a lot of rheumatology, vascularities, endocrinology, hematology, and some infectious disease. So a real mix which very much appeals to me. This second hospital was a privately run hospital, and I have to say very very slick and well run.

The service was split into three segments. I started off in the day case unit; here patients would come for either explorations or treatment. Each morning myself and another student were responsible for filling out the examination requests. Then we would see the patients, take their history and examine them. Present this back to the doctors and follow up their results later.

After a month here for my final two weeks I moved up to the ward. Here the routine was essentially the same, but with obviously more continuity of care, which I really enjoyed. The cases were very interesting and patients and staff alike very friendly. We also had weekly lessons with other students from other departments, which were on the whole very good.

I think one of the best things about this placement was the variety and I certainly learnt a lot of rheumatology/vascularities. The fact that the hospital is privately run meant that there were no middle grade doctors; this meant the teams were pretty small and we were usually working with two consultants in each of the departments. This was beneficial as I really felt I got to know them and they had a lot of time to teach, give feedback. Our role was very active and important to the running of the ward. Furthermore I think my medical French really improved on this placement, as well as on the last placement I felt more like I was doing admin a lot of the time, this one I spent most of the time talking to the patients.

I also found the other students to be a lot more welcoming than the first placement – having discussed with other students, we had found that the French medical students aren't quite as welcoming as we are as a rule to Erasmus students. However, that said I have found that if you make a bit of an effort they reciprocate and have made some good friends from hospital.

What you have learnt on the placement with regard to any differences to UK hospitals and practice, the medical training programme, the contrasting medical cultures.

I think on the whole the French medical is pretty good, patients certainly have got a good service in the two hospitals I have been at, especially in terms of getting the tests speedily.

I think the largest difference I have noticed between the systems is the importance we place on patient centered care in the UK and the communication skills, which we learn. Medicine in France is far more paternalistic, I think that this is very cultural and patients do not expect any different. However I have been in several situations where I have felt things could have been handled differently. Furthermore as I have had the time to talk to patients, I have found that they have really appreciated someone listening to their ideas, concerns and expectations – I never thought I would quite be such a fan of this, but I have really remarked how much this changes patients experience.

How you have gained from this experience in terms of linguistic development:

It is clear that this experience has improved my French immensely. It is clear that you cannot learn a language from a classroom and whilst the lessons in Manchester kept my language skills ticking gently over, I do not feel I learnt that much there – this is not a reflection of the teaching, but more the effort that I put into them. I also failed my DALF C1 the first time round, but retook it in March and passed easily. I took the DALF the second time round at the Alliance Francais in Paris – having signed up to it and paid my two hundred odd Euros (it is certainly worth putting the effort in the first time round to avoid this) I found out that they only did the DALF letters and human sciences. At first I was pretty worried about it, but in fact it was ok and not that different to the other DALF – it is only the written and oral section that the topics are changed. However if you do want to do the DALF C1 science stream if you are repeating, you may have to wait until June as I was unable to find anywhere in Paris that did it.

Whilst time at hospital helped my language, it is fair to say that the language you use there is pretty limited and medical lingo is essentially the same as English, which is comforting, yet for me my main goal of coming to France was really advancing my French. I think to do this making French friends is key and really making an effort to be constantly surrounded by it etc.

Coming to the end I do not consider myself remotely fluent, some days I really feel I have got the hang of it, others I am less sure, however I am clear that I have improved a lot. I can happily handle myself in almost any situation and most importantly feel far more confident speaking which is half the battle. The great thing about living in a foreign country is you pick up a lot of familial vocab, which otherwise you would have little access to.

How you have gained from this experience in terms of future plans:

In terms of the future, I feel really lucky to have my room until the end of June so after the last week in Manchester I am coming back to Paris to enjoy another five weeks. I am certainly not ready to leave and I think that four months is too short, it takes a while to settle in and ideally I would love to stay a year. I hope that I might be able to come back and at least live in France for another year within my training – I know other European countries can integrate this into their specialty training, I have yet to work out how this would work for us and our system seems to be a little different. Yet I still think that even as a “sabbatical year” it would be very worthwhile. I am also interested in working in developing countries and would be very open to working in other French speaking countries.

Any practical issues and further tips that future students on this placement should know about.

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As a student you can get CAF – this is essentially a housing allowance for students, it is quite admin heavy but well worth it as you get approximately 250 Euros a month towards your accommodation. My halls told me about it, but even if you rent a place you can get it. On that note if you can get a place in halls as Paris is exceptionally difficult to find a place and very very expensive. Open a bank account as soon as possible, you need it for CAF and also if you want to be paid by your hospital then you need one as well. As a student usually you can get one for free, my university has links with BNP so it was pretty easily set up.

If you do get a place in halls ask what you will have in your room as I found it was worth paying for an extra bag so I didn't have to buy the basics like another duvet etc again.

In terms of funding the trip, the Erasmus grant is pretty decent – although our last sum is being paid in June, which for me is not a problem as I am staying on, but I know for others is slightly frustrating as they will be back in the UK when that comes. The above CAF helps and you also usually get about two hundred Euros a month from the hospital. All this adds up to a pretty decent chunk of money helping to cover living expenses. On a practical note – for my final year I lived with other Erasmus students for the first few months of fifth year in Manchester. This meant we could get a six month contract and therefore I avoided having to pay rent on a room back home, which I wasn't using – a very useful exercise to do if possible.

I know that many people are worried about language skills when they come abroad and this was certainly something that played on my mind, but I think once you get here it is easy to integrate and it quickly becomes the norm to speak the language. Plus I have found that on all my placements everyone has been really nice and my language skills have never been a problem, indeed I have been told on many occasions how rare it is for an English person to speak such good French. I also met a Swedish girl in hospital who only had very basic French and to my knowledge she has made it through her placement, so I think the message is it will be ok.

I know that this sounds incredible cliché, but really enjoy it and take any opportunity that comes along. Having no exams makes the hospital experience very relaxed and ensures you can really make the most of whatever city you end up in has to offer. I certainly felt exceptionally lucky not to have to sit the French exams, as that would have been as an understatement very stressful.

My final impressions:

I have had such an amazing time in Paris, I think it is such a luxury to live in another city for this period of time whilst still a student. I understand that some people have reservations about the European Studies placements over usual electives. It is clear that I have seen some amazing photos and heard incredible stories from friends going off to far and exotic places. However, for me this cannot compete with what I have gained. I feel much more rewarded having lived in one place for a decent amount of time, getting to know it really well and making friends whom I hope will be for life. Further to this improving a language is a skill, which you can open many doors, which I hope to use in the future. And certainly the plus of going away for four months rather than two is a pretty good one.