

A photograph of the Eiffel Tower in Paris at night, illuminated with golden lights. The tower is framed by the dark, bare branches of trees in the foreground. The sky is a deep blue. The text "Paris Descartes Report 2015" is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif font.

Paris Descartes Report 2015

Why study on the European Option?

The European option was one of the main reasons I chose to come to Manchester as I'd done French up to A-level and didn't want to lose the language completely. After researching the programme further I discovered that doing it would also provide me with opportunities to do placements in France (or French speaking countries in Europe). I loved learning languages at school and this programme seemed to combine both my love of French and love for medicine.

The idea of being able to stay in France for four months after finals was too exciting to pass up and it was one of the best decisions I have made in medical school.

Overview of the Placement

Travelling to and from Paris

The cheapest option for me to get to Paris was by Eurostar, bearing in mind that cheap airlines would charge you extra per item of luggage. I'm from Birmingham and there are really cheap tickets to London available (anywhere between £5 to £15 without a railcard). I left the UK on a Saturday morning and was lucky to find a very cheap Eurostar ticket (£33). I would thoroughly recommend taking the Eurostar as nobody weighs your cases, which is super useful for a four month stay!

However, the problem was coming back from Paris. This was definitely my own fault as I had shopped far too much in Paris and somehow needed three suitcases on my way back, rather than two. I was travelling back to the UK by myself with three suitcases – nightmare! Thankfully, after being tutted and sneered at by Customs officers and told “trop de valises” (which is not helpful at all), a kind woman took one of my cases and helped me onto the train. Londoners, on the other hand, were less helpful and I had to borrow a luggage trolley from St. Pancras to walk to Euston station. It was a 10 minute walk that turned into a 25 minute struggle almost toppling over at least 5 times.

Accommodation in Paris

On one of my placements before finals I met a friend of a friend who had intercalated and was also going to be in Paris for four months. We got to know each other and decided to look for a place together.

We started looking on the internet a couple of months before finals in the hope that we could get it started before finals took over completely. We emailed and messaged tons and tons of people on loads of different websites. Most people were not willing to rent their homes out for the dates we needed. We started off looking at two bedroom flats but soon realised that this was impossible with a reasonable budget. We soon moved onto looking at apartments that had one bedroom but also a double sofa bed. We received a reply from a lady on airbnb (which I highly recommend using) who had a flat in south Paris. We hadn't received any other replies and time was running out and panic was setting in. We accepted this flat despite the 5 flights of stairs this included!

Neither me nor the girl that I had decided to live with were too keen on living back in halls. This would have felt like regression after living in flats with friends for so long. However, I did apply to the university halls and Cite Universitaire just in case we couldn't find a flat in time.

I know lots of people would not recommend living with someone from Manchester in Paris but, genuinely, I don't feel like I've missed out on making friends with Parisians or had a stifled social life at all.

Hearing about the other Manchester students and their living arrangements (mainly university halls and a few rented a room in a flat), I was glad with the option we had chosen as a few of them felt isolated and cramped and were faced with small rooms and sub-standard facilities. Also, be warned, university halls don't have Wi-Fi – you need a wire to connect to your computer.

All in all, we were incredibly lucky with our flat as it was surrounded by various shops, bakeries and restaurants (lots of sushi!) We were also on a great metro line (but I'll talk about that in the next section).

Travelling around Paris

Having spent a lot of time in London, trying to manoeuvre around the tubes and handle the ridiculous costs of getting around on public transport, I was more than prepared to experience something similar in Paris.

However, I was pleasantly surprised by the metro system in Paris. I arrived on the last day of January and met up with one of the other people from Manchester who had been there for a few days and had already done an SSC in Paris. She recommended getting a Navigo card which is the Paris equivalent of an Oyster card. You'll need a passport photo, 5 euros for the physical card and 70 euros for the month long pass. You need to be aware that the pass starts on the 1st day of the month, no matter when you purchased it. This means that even if you buy the Navigo on the 15th of the month, it will expire on the last day of the month.

The metro system is actually a lot better organised, in my opinion, than the London tube system. Paris is also smaller than London, or at least it feels that way. We were able to get to most places within half an hour despite being fairly south. We were also on an excellent metro line that went right through the centre of Paris all the way up north to the Eurostar station.

The Navigo pass gets you on the metro, the buses and the overground rail system (RER). All these modes of transport are excellent, efficient and on time (unlike what we're used to in the UK) so don't be put off by being on an RER line rather than a metro line. The buses follow similar routes to the metro lines but just take longer – I only took the bus once when the metro was out of service.

A one-way ticket costs 1.80 euros but it would probably work out better to get a book of tickets if you were to have visitors. A lot of Parisians just jump over the barriers and do it constantly – everyone from rowdy schoolboys to grown businessmen in suits. However, I wouldn't advise doing this as there are ticket inspectors at a few of the big stations. I also started seeing inspectors lurking around watching and catching people jump the barriers.

There was also a 4 day weekend when the whole public transport system was completely free! This made no difference to us because we had a travel card

but our visitors loved it! This initiative was to reduce the number of cars on the road.

Overall, the public transport system is amazing in Paris and I didn't miss having a car – well not that much anyway....

Free Time

Paris is an amazing city and being one of the most famous capital cities in the world, I wasn't apprehensive about entertaining myself there.

There is so much to see and do and explore in Paris that I don't even think I managed to cover it all in four months. I won't tell you about all the tourist stuff because you can find that in every guide book you pick up. I did do the touristy things but it's the other stuff – the getting lost, the coffee shops, the random encounters – that stick in my head more. There is a real café culture in Paris and we took full advantage of that. This is where we made most of our friends – randomly talking to people in cafes.

There is always so much happening in Paris. There are exhibitions and comedy shows that I would definitely recommend – just keep your eye out for posters and flyers dotted around stations and restaurants.

I'm not really one for partying and going out but Paris offers an excellent nightlife and I became a regular in a few places that played music that keeps you dancing till 6am (when you can crawl into McDonalds which is open all night). My favourite areas to get lost in, go out in or just have a coffee in are Bastille, Marais, Saint Michel, Chatelet and Montmartre.

Eating in Paris

I can't deny that Paris is an expensive city to live in and eat in. We tried to eat at home as much as possible but once the weather picked up a bit we couldn't resist sitting and eating outside on the restaurant terraces or having a picnic in the park. We were lucky enough to have a Carrefour down the road from us so if you want to save money I would advise doing weekly shops at your local Carrefour. The Carrefour own brand products are a lot cheaper than known brands and actually taste just as good (for the most part). Again, this whole

cooking situation depends on what accommodation you've managed to bag yourself as I know some of the halls have pitiful cooking facilities.

There are always plenty of fresh fruit and vegetable markets dotted around the city if you're after some fresh produce. When the weather is good, it's great to go the market, grab some bread, cheese and fruit then head down to the many, many parks and gardens in Paris.

At first we did get caught up in going to expensive restaurants and getting stuck somewhere that had distinctly average food but ridiculous prices. As time went on and we got more and more lost in random areas we found places that were cheaper and actually a lot tastier. This requires going off the beaten track and maybe going to places not listed in Time Out or Lonely Planet. Saying this, I would definitely recommend going L'as du Fallafel in the Marais for one of the best falafels I've ever had.

I would also suggest making the most out of being in France and surrounded by bakeries. Trust me, UK croissants have been ruined forever for me now.

There are tons of restaurants that sell crepes and tons of stalls. I would say ignore the restaurants and grab a crepe to go from a stall. The experiences that I had of crepes in restaurants were highly disappointing – warmed up crepe with a DRIZZLE of Nutella over the top.

Also, there are loads of halal and kosher places around Paris.

University – Paris Descartes

The university is very old and beautiful. It is well located in a gorgeous area with plenty going on around it. The Erasmus co-ordinator is extremely helpful and able to sort most things out if you drop her an email or pop to her office. However, remember to check any offices for odd French working hours, because I made the mistake of turning up on a Monday morning hoping to get things signed, only to find the office empty.

Hospital Placements

First thing to advise is not to bother taking smart clothes at all to Paris. Students, doctors, consultants, everyone wears casual clothes. Everyone wears

jeans, t shirts and trainers all covered up with a white coat (for one of my placements anyway).

Placement 1 – Gynaecology (Surgery) at Hopital Europeen Georges Pompidou

My first placement didn't really start off as planned.... I was given the wrong information by the Erasmus co-ordinator at my university so I went to the wrong hospital in the wrong speciality on the first day. I eventually got in contact with the co-ordinator who hadn't realised that she had emailed me the wrong information. When I finally received the right information it was too late to go in for that day.

When I actually made it to the right hospital and in the right department, nobody seemed to realise that I was meant to be there or who I was. HEGP is a relatively new and modern with a lot of security after the Charlie Hebdo attack. There was only one entrance open and all bags were checked going into the building. So, anyway, when I found the right floor and the right wing of this huge hospital I went searching for the doctor I was given. This resulted in me sitting outside his secretary's office for 1 hour 15 minutes. It turned out he was in theatre right now so I was just told to go speak to the final year medical students who were on the ward. The French students sort of said hi to me and turned away again until a kind nurse told them to include me in their duties and help me out. One of them spoke really quick and filled me in on where to go and put my bag and what days I would be in surgery and consultations. I tried to keep up but it was quite a lot to take in all in one go, especially at the speed he was talking.

For the first week I was in consultations with the gynaecologists. This involved going in everyday around 8.30am. All French medical students only stay in the hospital for the morning, so my day used to depend on the list of patients that I was doing with that particular doctor. In general, I would always be done by 1pm with consultations.

I had to introduce myself to a different doctor every day because there was a rotation system in place. I soon began to work out who the best doctors were to sit in with, who would let me do practical procedures and who would teach me things. I worked with around 8 doctors during the consultations and I really got on with and enjoyed working with around 5 of them so the majority were really friendly and open to having an English student. The patients at this hospital were really lovely and more than happy to let me ask them questions and do any examinations necessary.

I had to do 2 weeks of theatre out of the 8 weeks I was on this placement. I really disliked this aspect of the placement. I had to be in at 7.30am and finished whenever the doctor's list was finished. The problem here was that after 5 years in Manchester I had got used to being involved in the patient care and acknowledged as part of the team. The French way of doing things is quite different. I was kind of just brushed to the side and only occasionally allowed to scrub in. I had no real role in theatre here apart from to occasionally pass instruments. I also felt pretty lost in terms of the medicine and felt like I needed more teaching or information on what was going on.

Positives – consultations were great. Doctors were really friendly and patients loved that you were English. Doctors are not overly busy between patients during consultations so plenty of time for questions and teaching.

Negatives – do not expect to see your chef de service much! Medical students here were quite cold and didn't really want to make small talk at all. They didn't want to socialise or even really acknowledge you. It's not personal (I hope), they just want to concentrate on their work and their upcoming exams.

Placement 2 – SAMU at Hopital Necker

I made sure I had the right information for my second placement!

I started this placement at the same time as 16 other medical students (15 French and 1 Erasmus from Lauanne). This was a little bit reassuring that I

wouldn't be the only student there, although I tried not to get too optimistic after my experience with students on the previous placement.

We were all taken into a room and told to write down our contact details and what skills we felt we could already do (e.g. cannulas, bloods, intubation, airway management). This was extremely daunting as I watched everyone else make a list of all the skills they could do. Our roles were then explained to us and when we were expected to be here for. We needed to take turns to come in twice a week at 7am till 6pm and each do a 24 hour shift.

This suited me very well as I prefer to do long days a few times a week, rather short days every day. The only thing that worried me here were the 24 hour shifts – which I had only seen on Grey's Anatomy!

There were three ambulances to work with on this placement so each shift had three students. We had to arrive at 7am and make sure that the ambulances were properly stocked and went through numerous checklists to ensure everything was in place. The French principle is to transport a mini intensive care unit to the patient. This contrasts with the English method which is to transport the patient to a hospital as soon as possible.

After making sure the ambulance was well equipped, we went to an MDT at 8am to discuss the cases that happened during the night shift and to collect our bleeps and security passes. Then we just waited around, either in the dining area, the TV room or our bedrooms until our bleeps went off. On average, each bleep would go off 4 times a day. Emergencies that we attended were split into primary and secondary. Primary meant an emergency in a public area that could be anything. Secondary meant transporting a patient from one hospital to another (for different care or a different level of care).

I really enjoyed this placement, even the 24 hour shift! We were very involved in the patient care as there were only four of us in the team (paramedic, doctor, anaesthetic nurse and medical student). This meant that you had to be ready to go with your allocated role as soon as you got to the scene of the incident. I saw a variety of cases, some of them were quite traumatising (having to do CPR on a man who had died), and I learned something from each of them. All of the people I worked with, without exception, were lovely,

friendly, willing to teach and actually really fun to be with all day. This helped a lot on the 24 hour shift!!

Positives – great people to work with. I preferred these hours. Allows you to be very involved and feel part of a team.

Negatives – probably not for you if you don't like shift work.

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 feel like the French place a lot of importance on the medical and scientific aspect of medicine and hardly any on practical skills and communication. Watching both doctors and medical students with patients was extremely different to the UK. It was more of a decision made by the doctor and not a discussion, which is what we are used to in the UK. It's a very paternalistic way of practising medicine. I even experienced doctors insulting patients in front of them for stupidity and rolling their eyes at patients. The patients didn't say anything and just kind of accepted it as normal medical practice. Also, I was made to feel a little foolish when I was explaining in full detail a vaginal examination. The doctor and patient were just confused as to why I was explaining things in such detail and not just getting on with it. The emphasis in France is very much on your knowledge, even the weird and rare things.

Linguistic Development

There's no doubt that my French has improved tons. Although the French lessons in Manchester kept my French at a reasonable level, there is no substitute for immersing yourself in the country itself. I still don't completely follow all conversations – especially when they are talking faster than the speed of light and using all kinds of slang. However, I was reassured that sometimes people from Paris don't understand slang from neighbouring arrondissements. The only advice I can give in terms of improving your French – go out and talk to as many people as you can. Talking French in hospital is

not enough, in my opinion, because it's very medical based conversation and most of the technical jargon is similar to English words.

Future Plans

This whole experience has made me want to go back and live in Paris! I just totally fell in love with the city and would move back in a heartbeat. I resented Manchester slightly for making me come back for various bits of training.

It also cemented my plans to look into working with MSF in a French speaking country.

Advice and other useful stuff

Whatever your plan is for accommodation, start looking and sorting it as early as possible!

Don't expect to send forms or other admin to the Paris co-ordinator and receive a quick reply.....in my experience it's best to just turn up at their office.

Talk to random people – some will turn out to be completely weird; others will turn out to be the best friends you make in Paris.

Get lost in the first few weeks – you'll discover loads this way.

Buy a Navigo card.

Don't be offended if nobody expects you when you turn up full of enthusiasm and an English accent.

Use Airbnb, messynessychic.com (cool things to see, do and eat off the beaten track) and keep an eye out for posters and flyers.

With the Erasmus cash passport – it costs you every time you take money out an ATM so you're better off just paying for things at shops and restaurants with it.