

Why I chose the European Option

I had really enjoyed my A-level in French and I loved the country the few times I had visited, so when I was deciding between two university offers for medicine it was this unique opportunity to continue to develop my language skills which stood out at Manchester. As well as this, the chance to spend an entire semester abroad was very exciting. The programme has been hard work it was ultimately worth it.

Language classes at medical school

Early on in the course, attending the twice weekly, hour long language classes during the day was not too demanding, but attending the two hour session in the evening after hospital placement in the clinical years was difficult. Sometimes it was challenging to feel motivated with what felt like endless homework and poor progression when trying to take french exams at the same time as revising for the medical exams. However, having done two SSCs in France I knew how satisfying improving my french was, and despite the odd wobble, I persevered. This was certainly down to the excellent teaching we received. Our teacher was kind, patient and encouraging and this really did help me. The main examination in third year, at B2 level, is straightforward to pass. The DALF C1 however at the end of fourth year required far more focus. This felt so far off when I started EO but time flies and before long I was a proud (and surprised) holder of a lifelong DALF C1 qualification and packing to leave for France the day after finals results were released.

About Rennes

I initially had chosen Lyon for my fifth year placement. This was because I knew I would not be able to afford to live in the more expensive cities of Paris or Lausanne and I had visited before and knew I liked it. Plus, being further south seemed appealing! I knew hardly anything about Rennes or Nantes, two smaller towns further north which I had ranked first and second respectively. Subsequently I was given my second choice, Rennes, the capital of the region of Brittany, in North West France.

Rennes is situated an hour south from the northern coast and is a small, but lively town. I was told it was one of the cities in France with the largest proportion of students. There are two large universities, Rennes 1 and Rennes 2 plus many other specialised schools for business, law and finance. It has a beautiful, historical centre with a surprising density of bars and restaurants and an excellent, inexpensive public transport network. As an Erasmus student you will be a student of The Université de Rennes 1.

How I got there

Despite its proximity to England it is a rather awkward place to get to! In truth there are several options and the best one depends on where you are leaving from and the time you book. Being rather broke and disorganised with the stress of finals, I ended up taking the cheapest but longer and more tiring options, flying to Dinard airport from London Stansted. Seeing as I live in Lancashire this involved a fair amount of travel: a £6 bus from Preston to London, £8 bus to the airport, £40 flight and then a £10 car journey at the other end, which involved a lift share and a taxi.

The nearest airport to Rennes is Rennes airport. It has an ideal location being only a 20 minute bus ride from the centre. There are direct flights from Manchester, but only after

mid May and they can get expensive. However I believe Flybe operate a route from Southampton, London Southend and Exeter but again I am not too sure if these routes begin in winter.

If you cannot find a flight to Rennes, the next nearest airport would be Dinard. Ryanair operates flights from London Stansted which are very, very cheap. However this airport is probably the smallest I have ever seen. There is **no public transport from this airport** so when you arrive have a "covoiturage" planned (see useful links) or be prepared to get a taxi to nearby Pleurtuit (30 mins on foot), Dinard town (15 minute taxi) or St Malo (20 minute taxi) for onward buses or trains into Rennes.

Alternatively, Nantes is a larger town an hour and a half South of Rennes. Some major British airports offer direct flights here, and the train can be taken to Rennes. Finally, Rennes is 2hr40min by train from Paris Montparnasse, with some direct trains also leaving directly from Paris Charles de Gaulle airport. The trains in France are very expensive so it is advisable to book these journeys early.

If flying does not seem practical or you want to take a lot of luggage, the Eurostar to Paris then onward train, or even driving and taking the ferry across the channel (the port of Saint Malo is 45 minutes from Rennes) could be better options. Rennes is a 5 hour drive from the channel tunnel.

If I had my time again I would have got to Rennes via Paris or taken my car over there. The region of Brittany is very beautiful and many spots of the wonderful coastline are not well served by public transport. A car really allows you to take advantage of the region so if you feel confident enough on the wrong side of the road, this might be a good idea. I did not do this because it was complicated with my insurance but it is worth looking into.

Arrival

I was highly apprehensive about going to France, firstly because I was the only Manchester medic going and secondly because I had not spoken French for a good 5 months due to finals. I had already received invitations to Facebook groups for Erasmus medical and non-medical students by email and the 6 of us doing medicine in Rennes had already arranged to meet up the following morning. Knowing I wouldn't be completely alone helped ease my apprehension somewhat!

I had decided to spend my first week in temporary accommodation which I booked on airbnb. This is accommodation in people's homes. I stayed with a student of a similar age who had a spare room in his flat, this gave me a chance to find a "colocation" or flatshare. The next day I met up with 4 other Erasmus medical students from Norway, Germany and Austria.

Accommodation

I applied for halls of residence accommodation through the CROUS (University association for the whole country) but in the end I decided to find a flat share. You should receive the necessary paperwork to apply for halls when you complete your application. It is free to apply and the rooms here are definitely the cheapest option, ranging from 183 to 250 euros per month depending on whether you have an ensuite or not. Initially I was allocated a room at the Beaulieu Residence which is a bus ride from town. This meant getting a bus

and then the metro into hospital. I had been told by other students that the halls were not as sociable. It was for this reason I wanted to share with other french people instead. If you do go for halls, try and make sure you are placed in the area of Villejean or town centre because in the residences Patton and Beaulieu you will be relying on buses to get yourself into town. Villejean is the Rennes 2 university campus very close to the metro and main hospital and served by the night bus route. It is also important to know that for accommodation in halls you will need to buy "*assurance habitation multirisques*" which covers your room for fire and accidental damage. This costs about 100 euros for the year and can be bought from insurance offices, banks or online. It is a legal requirement but you will still be allowed to collect your keys without it.

The University was a little late in sorting out accommodation so this is why I did not get a residence in a decent area. I would suggest applying for halls as a backup but then finding a flatshare. In Rennes rent is inexpensive compared to Manchester, expect to pay 250 to 350 euros a month bills included. I found mine easily through Facebook groups and I will provide useful links at the end.

In conclusion, I would not overly worry about which accommodation you choose, as they all have pros and cons. I had friends in halls and they actually did socialise with the other Erasmus students. So halls are a good option, it is simply personal preference. I did speak french with the other Erasmus students but personally I find speaking french with other foreigners slightly odd so if improving your spoken language is a priority, I would search for a flat share with french people.

First day of placement

I was allocated 8 weeks of internal medicine and 8 weeks of cardiology. As an Erasmus student you will do most of your communication with Carole Pegeault, the secretary responsible for international students at the medical school. While she is lovely, she is variable in her reliability and sometimes does not respond to emails. Do not worry if you have not heard until the last minute where and when you will be expected, and be prepared to send Carole more than one email if you are worried!

On your first day on placement you will be expected at some point in the day to go and see Carole to sort out the necessary paper work. She will probably give you a meeting in the afternoon. Her office is at the medical school behind the main hospital, CHU Pontchaillou, on the third floor and is difficult to find.

This meeting involves filling out lots of forms as well as giving her the forms she will have sent over a couple of months previously, such as your vaccinations. To me, the paperwork seemed endless and I had left everything to the last minute due to finals! Everything to do with administration seems to take much longer in France.

In the end I had to go to the University doctor and have another skin test for TB even though I had had this done in the UK when I was 14, as well as a brief physical examination, for reasons I still do not understand.

You also will not be able to get your student card without a certificate of "*assurance de responsabilité civile*". I got this from a company called MACSF in town. You can also get it online if you find a company with a functioning website (I could not!). This should be **free**. If you say you are a medical student they will know what to give you.

The first day was definitely the worst. I experienced the horrors of french administration and was sent from pillar to post. Just go along with it, when everything is sorted it is worth it!

Brief overview of medicine in France

Almost anyone who passes the French equivalent of A levels, the Baccalaureat, with a decent grade can enter the first year of medical school. From here, there is a competitive exam at the end of the first year to continue to the second. 10% of the top performing students are successful and a maximum of 2 attempts is permitted. There is a total of three years of preclinical studies and then 3 years of clinical studies. During the clinical studies French students are called "*extremes*" and work at the hospital every morning and go to teaching in the afternoon. They are paid a small amount for this (100-200 euros a month) and are also expected to do "*gardes*" or on calls, which can last up to 24 hours. There are no University holidays but instead students follow a "planning" where they have days "On" and "Off" placement. At the end of 6 years students take a 3 day long MCQ exam and every student in the country is ranked. This ranks determines the students specialty as the top of the list chooses their specialty and region they want to train in, their '*internat*'. During this time of 3-5 years depending on specialty students work as '*internes*' which is our equivalent of Foundation Doctor/ SHO. After this they complete a thesis and have the right to apply for posts as "*assistant chef de clinique*" which is like a higher specialist registrar and afterwards a "*praticien hospitalier/praticien universitaire*" which is a consultant. The "*chef de service*" is a very experienced consultant who has ultimate responsibility for the whole ward.

Placement 1 Medecine Interne

I chose internal medicine because it sounded general, and the specialty does not exist in the UK. I was under the supervision of Professor Jego and was based at Hopital Sud, a hospital a 20 minute metro ride away which housed paediatric, obs and gynae and surgical specialties as well as some adult services.

When I arrived I saw there were two units, Renan and Carrel. No one was expecting me and so I explained to the internes who I was and was allowed to work on whichever ward I fancied. Even though I was told by Carole Prof Jego would be there at 9am to meet me, he was not, he was in clinic. This did not matter as I was very kindly welcomed by the internes and externes who were happy to explain how the ward worked and help me find a white coat or "blouse" to wear. Our role on this ward was to take responsibility of the new patients and clerk them in, then present to an Interne or praticien who would then see the patient with us. We were also charged with administrative tasks such as filing test results (there is a lot of paperwork in french hospitals!), writing in the notes and ensuring we had adequate information about a patient's previous history, by contacting GPs and other hospitals to ensure we had records of previous hospitalisations.

During this placement professor Jego carries out a teaching session at 8am on Tuesday morning and there is 3 hours of teaching in the afternoon 3 times a week which is lecture based at the faculty. I did go to this once but you are not expected to go as an Erasmus student and it is so detailed I only found it useful for vocabulary.

Overall I got a lot out of this placement, the patients were absolutely fascinating as internal medicine cares for difficult diagnoses and inflammatory, rheumatological and

haematological conditions. On my first day I saw a lady with frank signs of systemic sclerosis which previously I had only seen in a textbook! It was a good grounding in general medicine too as well as more specialised cases. I was able to go to clinic as well and see younger patients with lupus and fibromyalgia so the caseload was highly varied.

Placement 2 Cardiology

Cardiology was under Prof Mabo at the main teaching hospital, Pontchaillou. We were expected to clerk the new patients each day. This would have been a good placement but during the week the externes changed over and the numbers doubled from 5 to 10. This meant that I had next to nothing to do each morning. For this reason I tried to change over to the respiratory placement. However they also had a similar problem on this ward of too many externes. After a lot of difficulty I succeeded in changing my placement and returned to internal medicine, where the externes and internes had since changed. Otherwise this placement is well organised with a decent teaching ward round on Tuesday's and "ARCs" which were small group teaching sessions.

Additionally to this I took a "garde" from another student and worked on A and E on a Sunday. This was not compulsory but if you want the experience it is useful and very good for your french. You can join the Facebook groups for your "pole" which is like your module, and easily swap and take gardes from other students.

University life

The medical school is based behind the hospital at Pontchaillou. You will not need to go much as your presence at lectures will not be expected. There are also free french classes on offer at the CIREFE at the university. These were 2 hours twice a week. If you want to do this, we actually arrive too late as Manchester students to sign up officially but I went and asked at the CIREFE in person and did the level test there and then and entered a class a week late.

There are numerous cultural events run by students at the university, I went to some free concerts which were really good.

Additionally there is an association called ESN or the "Erasmus Students Network" and they organise events for the Erasmus students such as nights out and outings. Having gone to these events I have become friends with not only Erasmus students but also other international people and french people.

Sports at the university is accessible to all and is unlimited with an annual fee of 30 euros. Various activities are on offer.

Life in Rennes

Despite its small size Rennes is a great city for an Erasmus placement so don't be put off! The public transport is excellent with a clean, cheap underground service and an extensive bus network. To use the metro and buses it is best value to buy a "Korrigo card" and charge it each month, for a student this costs 31 euros per month.

There are a wealth of pubs, bars and restaurants to suit most tastes. Every Monday there is an "soirée langomatique" at one of the Irish bars in town, O'Connell's. I ended up going here every Monday because it is set up to meet people from all over. I made lots of friends

just from going to this night. On Tuesday's there is an Erasmus party at a Latin themed bar called Cubanacan. The publicity for this doesn't do much to encourage you, but lots of Erasmus students go and this is also a fun way to meet people.

On Thursdays it is student night all over Rennes. A good place to start off would be the bars round the "Saint Anne" quarter and specifically the "rue de la soif", a famous short stretch of cheap bars, which is useful as in general in Rennes alcohol in bars can get expensive. The Rennais differentiate between a "bar" which opens until 1am, a "bar de nuit" which opens until 3am, and a "boîte" or nightclub, which tend to be open until 6-7am. The bars I would personally recommend are Frogs and Friends, O'Connell's, La Banque, Le Petit Vélo, l'Atelier des Artistes, Couleurs Cafe, La Cité d'Ys.

Clubbing tends to be expensive, entry is usually 15euros but includes a drink. The clubs are not too well thought of but I personally enjoyed a club called Delicatessen which is based in an old prison.

Another event I recommend would be the Rock 'N Solex festival in May this is the oldest student run music festival in the world. It lasts 3 days and is well worth it!

For going out to eat, Brittany has a cuisine typical of the region, the most famous are savoury pancakes called gallettes, with various fillings, and sweet crepes. It is traditional to eat these with some local cider to wash it down. There are numerous creperies throughout Rennes and the ones I would recommend are La Gavotte and La Saint George's.

Otherwise there are plenty of good, inexpensive restaurants representing most cuisines. A particular favourite of mine if you get homesick is Apple Pie. This is an organic cafe managed by an Irish lady. You can speak English and order classics such as scones. All is made from produce grown on the family's farm.

Rennes is also home to the second largest market in France, le marché de Lices. This is every Saturday morning and sells all kinds of foods. An important thing to taste would be gallettes saucisse if you like sausages, but I preferred salted butter caramel again typical of the region. These are inexpensive from the numerous market stalls. Finally you should try Kuign Aman if you like pastries. In the Breton language this means butter cake, it is delicious but calorific!

If you have become tired of all the eating and drinking, Rennes has a tourist office and you can go see the cathedral, the Parliament and look at the historic wooden houses. It is also surrounded by beautiful countryside and as a runner I really appreciated the chance to run along the banks of the river Villaine.

The football team of Rennes plays in the French premier league and the stadium is not too far from the town centre.

Around Rennes and climate

The Coast in Brittany boasts some of the best beaches in France, if not Europe. Unfortunately the Breton weather tends to let them down, expect it to be rather cold when you arrive. However as Spring approaches the days get warmer than in the UK and I still managed many outside barbecues and day trips. The towns of Saint Malo, Dinard and Cancale are among the highlights on the coast, and inland the town of Nantes is not too far away.

Conclusion

The medical system in France is different, with less focus on practical skills as a student and more focus on knowledge. This left me feeling like I was lagging behind my french peers. What I may have been lacking in book knowledge though I did make up for in practical application, so try not to be disheartened by the difference in systems.

All in all I would not change a thing about my time in Rennes. Being the only student forced me to get out there and make loads of friends, many of whom I hope to stay in touch with forever, and I really improve my French. The people of Rennes are among the most open and friendly I have ever met, with many friends I made just being people I met in bars, and their English tends to not be very good so even more chance to practise. The transport allows you to still enjoy a good night out and the small size means you can walk home or get the night bus.

From this experience I would definitely consider coming back to work in France in the future. I plan to take a year out after F2 so hopefully then would be a good time. If you are hesitating about choosing Rennes, go for it, you won't regret it!