

Why I choose European option

Having grown up in Mauritius, I've been exposed to French language and culture from an early age and I was happy to have the opportunity to continue speaking French and visit France whilst studying in England. Even though I did not particularly like the idea of having 2 hour long classes for 2 years, I knew it was necessary in order to do PEPs and a 4 month electives abroad. I ended up really enjoying French classes and learnt a lot.

As part of the European option studies I was able to spend 4 weeks at the end of third year in Lyon in a specialist centre for heart and lung surgery which was a very good experience.

Why Paris

Even though I knew Paris was a lot more expensive than other cities, I had to go back to Manchester twice during my electives and wanted to go to Belgium as well. From Paris, it is a lot easier and cheaper to travel than from Lyon or Nantes for example. I had also been to Lyon before and wanted to be in a big city where I would be able to meet a lot of people, have a lot of activities to do and where hopefully people would be used to foreigners.

Preparing for Paris

Having never been to Paris, I did not know how the metro worked, the good neighbourhoods to be in or even how difficult it can be to find accommodation. With finals to prepare for, I chose university accommodation as it was the easiest option and thought I'd figure out the rest when I was in Paris. I had not thought about accommodation for the first day as the university accommodation started on the first day of hospital placement and we were expected to be at the hospital at 9am. Before, we had been told that we should arrive in Paris 1-2 weeks before our placement started in order to register with the university. This would have been expensive as I would have had to look for accommodation and inconvenient as it would mean leaving for Paris straight after finals with little time for packing or meeting friends. Fortunately I emailed the Erasmus coordinator in Paris Descartes and she said that I needed to be in Paris on the first day of the placement at the latest which was a lot more convenient.

Arriving in Paris

I took the Eurostar to Paris at 7 am after spending the night at London St Pancras as it was significantly cheaper and therefore I took the coach to London the night before. It was quite a tiring journey but I was able to rest on the Sunday and so overall, it was not a bad decision. My friend who lives in Paris came to pick me up from the train station and together we dragged my two suitcases up and down the stairs in the metros and I stayed at her's the first night as my accommodation started the next day. It is quite difficult if you're alone to carry your luggage in the metros and one tip is to try and find a bus that goes to where you want to go. It might take longer but there are fewer steps involved. I brought some Euros on cash with me as I did not know how long it would take for the eurocash passport to be credited with money or for me to be able to open a French bank account.

Finances

It was quite easy to activate the Erasmus cash passport and there are details on how to see your transactions online. I did the mistake of taking cash out from the credit card during the second month of my placement after I had used all the cash I had brought from Manchester until my friend told me that I was charged about €3.50 each time. After 2 months, I finally opened a French bank account. The process was extremely easy and I wished I had done it a lot earlier. It is also very important to do it early in order to claim the CAF money which can only be claimed from when the request is made. The people working in the accommodation were quite helpful if you need help to fill out the CAF forms. I did not use my French account as I went to Manchester twice and brought cash both times.

The first installment of our Erasmus grant was very straightforward as the Erasmus coordinator signed our forms quickly and it was processed quickly in Manchester too. The second installment we were told might come a lot later than expected and to make provision for that. This was a bit annoying as we were only told about that when we were already in France. I would also earmark some money for emergencies as during my stay, 4 people that I knew got their phones stolen or lost it, 1 girl lost her keys and I missed my flight back to Manchester.

Living situation

I took a shared accommodation in one of the university accommodations in the 18th. The office closed at 5 30 pm so in order to go meet my supervisor in the

morning, go to the central office and finally get to the accommodation before 5 30pm, it was slightly stressful. I did not have GPS on my phone and therefore it took me a lot longer to get to places that were actually not very far from each other and made the whole process quite stressful. The staff member at the central office was very helpful and phoned my accommodation to inform me the time that they were closing and inform them that I was coming. At the office, they confirmed that shared accommodation meant that I shared my room with another girl. The kitchen area in my room was very small, there was no microwave or oven and a fridge with only one small shelf as a freezer. I was lucky that my roommate was very nice and we got along well. We were both considerate of each other's schedule and tried not to make too much noise or keep the lights on late at night. Having a roommate was useful as we also did a lot of things together initially like shopping for bedding and kitchen items. I became friends with my neighbours who were very friendly.

There were some hidden costs in the accommodation where I lived. I only found out when I got my keys that I would have to pay for electricity. Even though it was not very expensive, around 10 Euros a month each, it was a bit annoying that I hadn't been told before. I had to go through the hassle of opening an account at EDF and remembering to pay the bills.

The rent was quite cheap at €300/ month, however the contract was for 5 months and I only needed accommodation for 4 months. Also this meant that it was not practical to offer accommodation to friends who wanted to visit.

There was 1 event organised after 2 months in my halls, where I met more people. Most people living in my halls were also Erasmus students who were quite keen on making new friends although they had to spend time studying and revising.

After being in my accommodation for 2 months, I was told by other residents that there were some homeless people who would sleep in the common room of our building at night. Fortunately, I was living in block A which was far from the common room, however this made me feel unsafe when coming back home late. There were no night guards but they left before midnight.

Overall, I would probably still choose this accommodation as it is cheap and looking for alternative accommodations from the UK is quite difficult. The neighbourhood is quite rough but I was lucky to stay near the metro and always felt quite safe. I had very few night outs in Paris and as there were lots of different places where people tended to go out, people who lived closer to the

venue were usually happy let you sleep on their couch for a few hours. No matter how central you were located, unless you wanted to walk back home for 30 minutes, it was generally difficult to get back home after the metro stopped unless you wanted to take the night bus which I was told was quite dangerous.

Safety

Near the tourist attractions, we are specifically told on the metro to be careful as their may be pickpockets on the metro. During one of my visits to Montmartre, there were some guys standing on the stairs and they had threads that they tried to sell by tying them around people's wrists. This was quite scary as they got really close to people and as they were holding your hands, it was very easy for their friends to try and steal your belongings.

In the 11th arrondissement, my friend got her bag stolen. She had it on her chair and we were having drinks outside as it was a nice day and none of us noticed that someone stole her bag.

Getting around

I took the Pass Navigo which allowed me to take the metro, rer, bus in zones 1 and 2 during the week days and trains to areas outside zones 1 and 2 during the weekends. It is very convenient and affordable. In order to meet friends or go to the hospital, I had to spend an average of 40 minutes on public transport which isn't too bad. I used this time to read books that I bought at Gilbert et Jeune which is a bookstore that sells cheap French and English books. Some of the French books that I enjoyed were *l'Etranger* (Albert Camus), *Bel Ami* (Maupassant) and *l'Assommoir* (Zola).

The best thing to do is to buy the pass navigo for one month on the first of the month. It can be bought at all metros provided you have one passport size picture. The RER is quite busy and crowded in the morning and is less frequent than the metro. There are also quite often delays in the metro either because of stolen rails, baggage left unattended or passengers not feeling well. In general, the two last ones tend to occur more during peak time and therefore leaving 5 minutes earlier often makes a huge difference.

Using the pass Navigo during weekends, I was able to go to Versailles, Auvers sur Oise which is a town where Van Gogh lived before his death, la queue-les-velines to see butterflies and la défense.

Free time

In Paris, we only had placements in the mornings usually until 12 30/1 pm. This was great because it meant that I could visit Paris during the day. It helps to have other Manchester Erasmus friends because not a lot of people will have as much free time as we did during 4 months and it's nicer to visit places, parks and coffee shops with friends.

There are lots of things to do in Paris and I never felt bored during the 4 months that I was there. I was also lucky to know a few people who were already in Paris and spent some afternoons and weekends with them. I found that French medical students have very little free time and I did not find it very easy to make new friends.

I would recommend visiting the gardens of Versailles , the catacombs even though you have to queue for about 3 hours, going to the theatre, opera and Orsay museum. Most places are either free or discounted for people between 18-25 who have a European student visa. For the theatre and opéra, you can often buy the tickets at a discounted price on the day itself from 11am at some kiosques that sell tickets. For the opera, I learnt that it's important to have a basic knowledge of the story line in order to understand what the artists are expressing.

There are lots of bank holidays in May and it's worth trying to visit other cities with friends. We were quite unlucky in that didn't have good weather during our bank holidays and therefore decided not to go on trips during the bank holidays. When planning trips, blablacar is a cheap way of travelling and it's also a way of making new friends.

Food

As a pescarian in Paris, it was easier than what I thought it would be to find fish and vegetarian options. Food is quite expensive but knowing the right places helps a lot. I would not recommend eating at random places as usually the food isn't great and it's expensive. There's lot of different cuisines available and great French food to try.

Black coffee is usually a lot cheaper than coffee with milk and you get used to it very quickly.

I did not shop or cook a lot mainly out of laziness and also because on many nights, I would eat out with friends. I shopped at the intermarché next to me

because I did not really trust the food that was sold at the other independent shops or the markets outside my accommodation.

I love compotes and yogurt and ate lots during the 4 months I was there.

The hospital cafeteria is usually a good place to eat lunch as it is very cheap. It helps if the other medical students are also eating as it's not as fun eating on your own.

The pastries and bread are also really nice and usually available in every neighbourhood and they close on different days so that there will usually be one open even on Sunday nights or Bank holidays. Sometimes there are local markets open on Sundays. It is however difficult to find supermarkets that are open and therefore it is better to buy food in advance before bank holidays weekends.

University - Descartes

The Erasmus coordinator was very kind and replied to emails quickly. We got our student card within 1 week. She did not mention to us that if we gave our bank details at the hospital, we would get paid as the French students do for being on placement.

One of the Manchester students who had volunteered to help out with a simulation class in English was unable to make and asked me if I wanted to go instead. It was a great experience and it was a chance to see the French students perform osce type situations in another language. I had to be a simulated patient and give feedback at the end. I would strongly recommend doing that. The language teacher then invited us to the feedback session the next week and also took us to the Dupuytren's museum which was very interesting.

I attended two of the neurology lectures. The quality of the university lectures was very dependent on the lecturer and I enjoyed knowing what French medical students did after placements. It was usually two sessions of an hour long tutorial with 30 minutes of case based discussions each. I found that the French lectures are very focused on their exams. The lecturer would often specifically say what needed to be remembered for their exams and to what depth. He would also give examples of past questions. This is quite different to Manchester where most people never say specifically that something won't come up in exams as the progress test can be on anything. I found that because the French had a set curriculum, they were able to learn certain things in more depth e.g specific MRI signs of coning or midline shift.

Hospital placements

1. My first placement was ophthalmology at HEGP.

This placement was only inpatient clinics and outpatient follow up and involved taking a brief history, measuring corrected visual acuity, examining the eye using the slit lamp and arranging for further treatment or follow up. At first, my supervisor was not very welcoming and would rarely explain things to me. I felt that I was not helpful to them and that I was not learning anything.

After a few weeks, I became more involved in the team and I had read more on ophthalmology which made it a lot more interesting. I was taught how to use the slit lamp by the registrar and was able to practice that.

At HEGP there was no emergency appointments, so over the 2 months that I was there, I only saw 1 emergency. In ophthalmology, they almost never use the ophthalmoscope which is what I think is most useful for medical students and other specialties. As there was a lot of routine follow up appointments, it can get very boring after 2 months. I think this placement is best for students who are interested in ophthalmology and want to practice using the slit lamp.

2. My second placement was in internal medicine at IMM.

This was a semi private hospital. I was very modern and there were no wards, but only single and double rooms. There was also a day ward where patients came for infusions of chemotherapy or biological drugs as well as check-up tests for patients with chronic conditions like diabetes and HIV.

Patients admitted to internal medicine had a range of presentations but common ones were vasculitis, pyrexia of unknown origin, lower limb oedema, back pain, anaemia and sub-optimal diabetes control. It is a very interesting placement to do if you enjoy thinking about weird and wonderful diseases.

We had teaching at least one per week on various topics from critical appraisal of papers to the different types of insulin pens and glucose monitors.

Compared to other hospitals, the French medical students said that it was less stressful as they were less responsible for patient care. They didn't have to order tests and write in the medical notes as much. We each clerked an average of 2 patients per week. There was a formal ward round twice a week and often, we would go on specialist ward rounds with the neurologist, diabetes specialist and rheumatologist. At the end of my placement, I had to present a case to the medical team which was a bit of a stressful experience as I did not know what they were expecting.

Overall, I would highly recommend this placement. I learnt a lot and the doctors are very welcoming to Erasmus students.

French medical system compared to British system

The French dress more casually in hospitals. Jeans, t-shirts and tennis shoes are acceptable.

They pay less attention to the legal aspects of documentation than we do. They often correct their previous entries or other people's entries in the notes or electronic letters. They also write down in notes retrospectively a lot more than we do and write a lot less than we do.

When writing down the past medical history, they are a lot more thorough. They will often mention the treatments and associated complications of each disease. French medical students choose their specialty directly after medical school by doing one written exam after which they choose a specialty according to their rank. They have something similar to our foundation programme where they have to do two 6 month placements in other specialties before they start their chosen specialty.

For at least 2 years, most French students will pay for additional courses that are very expensive in order to prepare for their final exams. This will often be between 8 pm to 10 30 pm which means that some of their days are extremely long.

The French are more open and will often criticise each other's professional decision or working habits. This was quite shocking at first as this is considered unprofessional in the UK. The nurses and doctors often have clashes regarding workloads and prioritisation.

Linguistic development

The French love speaking their language well and even though there are a lot less French words than English words, French use more of them when talking daily. They often use more specific and technical words as well as expressions. This can make it more difficult to follow a conversation or watch plays. Some of the common French expressions can be found on Google and are very funny. They also use a lot of slang, verlan and shorten words which I would never have learnt had I not lived in France as these are often not included in French movies.

The French will also often correct you if you make mistakes when speaking in French. For example, I was corrected when I said 'infusion' instead of 'perfusion'. Being able to practice French a lot, I improved quite a bit. I use less words that are used in Mauritius and do not make sense in France. My medical French improved a lot, especially when I did my placement in internal medicine as I read had to read lots of referral letters and clerk patients. I still make a few spelling mistakes, but that's because I'm often too lazy to check every single word before I write to make sure it's correct. I also find it easier to find my words and hopefully I pronounce words better now.

Inter-cultural understanding

From the first few days, I realised how different the French were from the Mauritians and British. I thought they were quite rude and pretentious. I ordered a book on French anthropology as I wanted to be able to understand the French in more details, having done that same when I first came to England and found it very useful. I read the book 'sixty million Frenchmen can't be wrong, why we love France but not the French'. It was a great book and helped me understand the French culture, history and organisation and I saw aspects of it in my daily interactions afterwards. It tackled a wide range of subjects, some of favourite being:

1. French consider food to be a social experience. They tend to eat with people whilst enjoying the food, I.e not watching t.v but discussing with each other. This also means that it's not part of their culture to snack.
2. They believe that it only makes sense for a central government to hold all power and to be the one to decide on what should be studied at school or how to combat socioeconomic inequalities. Therefore the French don't really understand how all medical schools can have different curriculums in England and don't give generously to charities.
3. It is considered inappropriate to speak about money or to display wealth in France. Therefore, people drive relatively less expensive cars and will often fight for better working conditions rather than ask for a pay rise.

I visited the museum of absinthe which I enjoyed as it was a nice way to learn about alcohol's history in France about how people wanted to make it illegal and how it was advertised back in the days. It is also nice to see paintings centered about it. It also at one point became more popular than wine which is quite surprising considering how much the French love wine and later it was thought to cause psychosis.

I also read a book about the French Revolution which helped to understand the country's ideals of equality which for medical students translated as a national exam where they were ranked to choose their specialty.

Meeting at a friend's house with some of my French friends, I learnt that it is quite common for them to start smoking outside on the balcony initially and then smoke inside when they are a bit drunk, which at first I found very annoying.

They also tend to drink wine on night outs.

The French dress more practically than the English and therefore wear comfortable shoes, jeans and tops a lot. They are considerably less dressed up when they go out for drinks and most places are not very strict on the dress code, even the opera garnier.

I also discovered new French singers, movies, writers, artists and YouTubers like Thomas Fersen and re-discovered Serge Gainsbourg. This was mainly because I asked the medical students around me what kind of French music they listened to as I wanted to listen to discover more artists.

Compared to what I thought, people in France do not dislike English people that much. Some of them love speaking English and this can be from the waiter at the hospital to a doctor at the hospital. It is however also true that some of them hate speaking English. A lot of people I met had lived abroad, often in England, as part of their studies or job. The French people often used some English words in their day to day life which was quite funny.

Ideas and future plans

Having learnt more about the French culture and health care system, I don't think I would like to work in France permanently. I would however love to come back for another placement either during my specialisation or if I'm taking a year out.

In the future, I would like to travel different countries as it helped me understand people more and also appreciate England more as there are many things that I took for granted. There is a lot less competition in England and less racism that I have noticed.

I think that travelling for work is great. This is because you can stay in the country for longer, it is easier to make friends and learn the culture quickly. Financially, it is also easier and it is good to learn about different systems as one can contribute to them having had another perspective. Having graduated with European option, hopefully it will be easier for me to work in France if I wanted in the future.