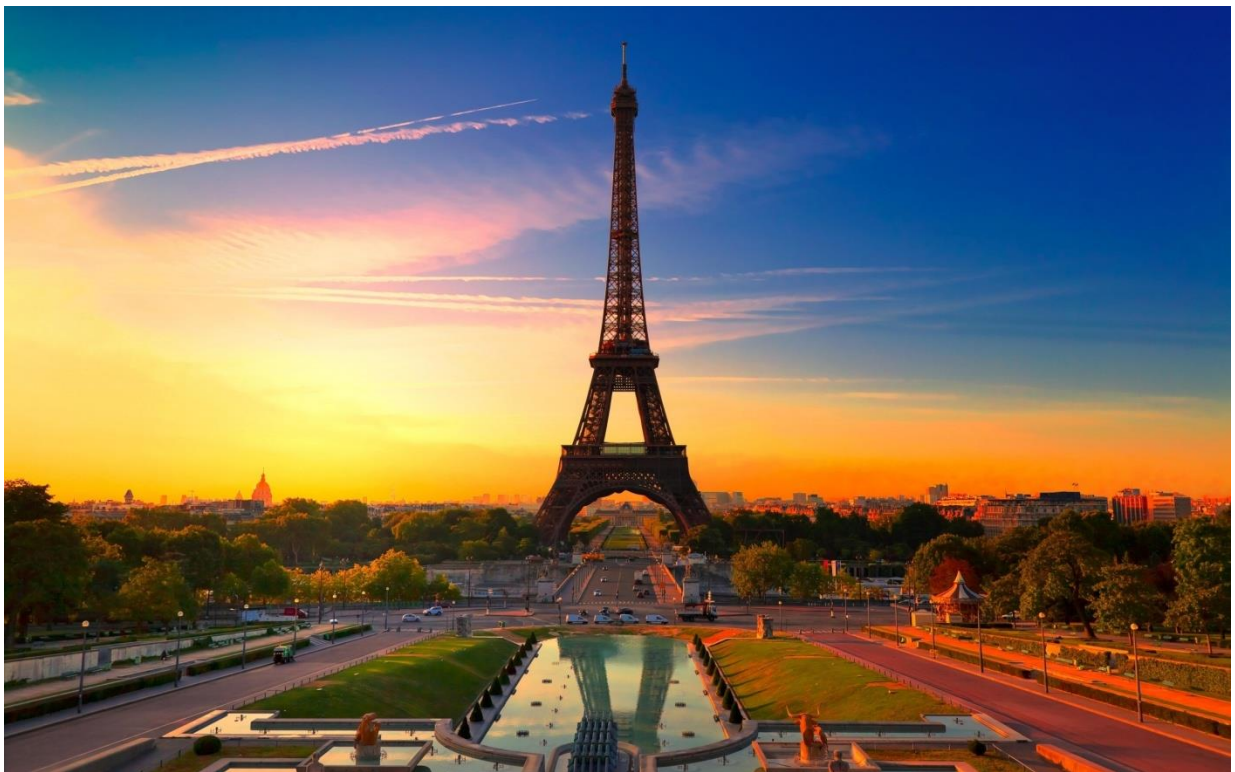


European Option Report

Paris Descartes



Why European Option

When I was at school I absolutely hated language classes- I found conjugating verbs and learning vocabulary by heart dull and uninteresting. This changed however when I got to do a French exchange age 14 and stay with a family for 2 weeks- being immersed in the culture and language gave a completely different take on learning French and showed me how many doors can be opened by speaking another language. My french exchange and I stayed in contact and visited each other every summer for about 2-3 weeks. Every other year I'd go to her and the years in between she'd come to me. We got close to each other's families and to each other's friends and really enjoyed learning each other's language. This exchange continued until we were about 19 and we're still great friends now and often visit each other, this is also much easier now that our linguistic skills are that much stronger. I took french up to A- level at which point I found the lessons much more interesting. We looked at literature, culture and history rather than just doing grammar exercises. When I was accepted to medical school I was thrilled but also a little sad that I would likely lose a lot of my language no longer having formal lessons. When I heard about the European option offered at Manchester I was very interested- firstly I had no idea how they could combine medicine and a foreign language as I'd never really heard of that being offered anywhere else, and secondly because it sounded like the perfect way to keep up my language skills. I was a little apprehensive at first that I was taking on too much work for myself and it was sometimes really hard to motivate myself after a full day in hospital to go for another 2 hours of French lessons on a Wednesday evening. However I found that actually our classes bonded really well and the teachers always made a huge effort to make the lessons interesting and fun.

My Experiences

I was allocated to Paris for my 4 month placement in 5th year. Lyon was actually my top choice so initially I was a little concerned that I would find Paris too expensive and a bit overwhelming. After having been there however I can honestly say I had the best time of my life and I'm so glad I went. I would advise you not to make a snap judgement on whether you like a place when you first arrive.. give it 2 weeks to a month. When I first arrived I found it really overwhelming being in a new city, a new country, speaking a foreign language, trying to make friends and having to start a placement in a completely unfamiliar setting and healthcare system. Everyone else that I spoke to felt the same for at least the first 2 weeks and it's after that period that things start falling into place. Once you're comfortable with where you're living and have made it homely, have worked out your commute, have got to know your hospital and have made some friends the whole experience just gets better from there.

I lived in university halls- residences ornano. Any advice to people going to Paris is that the accommodation service 'crous' is ridiculously disorganised. If you need something done by them it is best to go and see them in person rather than sending an email. Once everything was organised however I had no problems with them. When arriving to your city, I would also advise you to join the various erasmus facebook groups for that particular city and year. There will be loads of erasmus students looking to get together and go out etc and it's definitely worth going to some of the nights out as they are hilarious. It's also a really good way to meet people. I was lucky enough to have a French friend who lived in Paris who introduced me to her group of friends which really helped me to immerse myself in the language. However I found that in general the local French people were

quite difficult to get to know. Whilst the externs were friendly enough, they have a lot of work outside of hospital and so are not particularly keen to socialise. Most people end up spending a lot of time with other Erasmus students which I think can be really good fun, as long as it's not at the expense of immersing yourself in the language. I was fairly brutal and barely let anyone speak to me in English, otherwise a lot of the other students will use you to try to improve their English which is not the reason you moved to France for 4 months!

Hopital St Joseph- Gastro- enterology

My first placement was in gastro- enterology in Hopital St Joseph. On the first day expect to just be running around doing various admin jobs such as getting your white coat and name badge etc. The staff were friendly but by the end I did find myself getting quite bored. I think this is because I was a little hesitant at the beginning of the placement for doing things like making phone calls, so I think they got used to not giving me much responsibility. Although getting stuck in straight away can be daunting, I think it is worth it to get the most out of a placement both linguistically and medically. St Joseph is a really friendly little hospital in the south of Paris. It's half- privatised and has a catholic church in the middle of the grounds which was a surprise but is a nice feature. It's worth being aware that the medical students are in charge of the 'planning' which is the timetable that decides whether you're in clinic or on the ward/ working the weekend etc. Make sure you have your say in where your name gets put down on the planning because myself and several other Erasmus students I know ended up being put down wherever suited the other students without being asked.

Hopital Europeene Georges Pompidou- A&E

My second placement was in l'Hopital Europeene Georges Pompidou which was a totally different experience. It's an enormous hospital opened in 2001 so it has a very new feel about it with lots of windows and open space with plenty of plants in the entrance area. This time I was in A&E and had built up more confidence to get as involved as possible. As it's a huge city centre hospital it was a very busy department and I was given as much experience as the other externs so was far from bored. Both of my hospitals were south Paris and whilst I lived in the north it only ever took me around 50 minutes despite having to cross the whole of Paris.

Comparison between French and UK Healthcare systems

I found that there were many similarities between the French and English healthcare systems as well as some differences. The main difference that stood out to me was the casual attitude the consultants had with their relationships with students- everyone calls everyone by their first names and it's quite acceptable to use 'tu' instead of 'vous'. It took me a while to feel comfortable being on casual first name terms with the consultants as this would be considered fairly disrespectful in the UK. The lack of communication training in the French medical training system was also fairly apparent in the way students and doctors approached patients. Over here there is a lot of emphasis put on patient- focussed discussions when explaining treatments and asking for consent to examine. I found in France it was quite common on ward rounds for doctors to whip up the patient's gown and start examining without any warning, and leaving the room without thanking the patient. It may be the case that patients expect this and are less distressed by it than UK patients who are used to a different approach, but the differences certainly stuck out. Medical school is done differently in France- in first year there is no selection process for entry, everyone who applies is accepted. They

are then essentially given the first year to prove themselves and pass the exam at the end of the year which 9/10 students fail. After failing this exam they are able to re- take it once again, but as their last chance to continue into 2nd year. This means that for most students, instead of making friends and getting to grips with their new surroundings in first year, it is spent studying and working in fierce competition with their peers. Again in final year medical students take an exam called the 'concours'. As they don't have F1 and F2, how well they do in this exam dictates what specialities they can train in- for example only high scorers can do highly competitive and popular specialities, and low scorers are limited to less popular choices. Yet again the students are stressed and in direct competition with each other. I personally felt that this stress and competition came across in the relationships between the externs. In Manchester I feel that we get the chance to bond really well within our PBL groups as well as with the rest of the cohort in our base hospitals, and that getting along with your peers makes each rotation a lot more fun. I felt that on the rotations I did in Paris, the students were a lot less close to each other and often didn't even eat lunch together. They were also often really stressed on the wards- much more so than the doctors. This was a real shame as I feel most of the fun of medical school is due to having fun and good relationships with your friends/ colleagues and although we are always in competition with them to some degree, I don't feel like it's to the same extent as in France. I have to say though that the French medical students have really good science knowledge, with their course focussing far less on communication and far more on the core science behind medicine.

What I have gained from this experience

I have gained so much from this experience linguistically, in terms of inter- cultural understanding and personally. I have to admit I was a little disappointed initially not to be going somewhere more exotic like my colleagues on their electives, as in comparison the idea of going to France seemed a little boring. However I could've been more wrong as this has been one of my best experiences to date. After months of cramming for finals, I was keen to relax and have fun so I made a conscious effort to say yes to everything I was invited to. To be honest although this meant that I had a great time socially, given that I was also on placement I did end up burning the candle at both ends a bit. To be honest though it's only for a short period of time and I can genuinely say it was worth it.. you're going to be working properly as a doctor from August so make the most of the time you've got now to do what you want. I also found the excuse of 'I don't really know I'm not french/ we don't do this in England' came in incredibly handy when I was feeling slightly out of my depth in hospital- I am definitely going to miss that excuse come August when I'll be expected to actually know something.

Linguistically I feel like I've improved a lot, but it didn't come quite as quickly or easily as I was hoping. Before I came I assumed I'd just automatically become fluent by osmosis with no extra effort from myself. This wasn't the case and it actually took quite a lot of effort on my part to get to the level I feel I'm at now.. It's worth making a conscious effort to speak as little English as possible which isn't as easy as it sounds. Take the opportunity to chat to the other externs and doctors, to talk to patients, read books and watch films to completely immerse yourself. I was lucky enough to have a group of french friends which is probably what helped me improve my french more than anything else, although if I was to do it again I'd definitely do more things like listening to french radio and reading french magazines etc. The part of the language I enjoyed getting to grips with the

most was the slang phrases- even better when you come out with them with an English accent french people appear to find this hilarious..

It's hard to say whether I'd want to work in France. I like the idea of living and working in France but I think practically in terms of the medicine it might be too difficult to transfer. By the looks of it you either have to take the 'concours' which is a hideously difficult exam in which you would be in direct competition with the French students who have been trained for it throughout their whole medical education, or you'd have to wait until you're a consultant. In terms of future plans I would definitely be tempted to come back in a few years' time and do some locum jobs in France- maybe not Paris but it might be fun to explore a different part of France. I certainly want to keep up my language skills so I plan to do this by visiting the friends I've made over here as well as continuing to watch French films and reality TV (les anges de la télérealité- ridiculously bad) and read French books. This sounds really keen at this point and I do hope that although I'll be busy as an F1, if I incorporate it into part of my routine it'll be easier to keep up.

Practical Issues

Accommodation

I studied with Paris Descartes so I applied for accommodation via their university website. They use the accommodation service called 'CROUS' and everything was organised over email which was quite useful as I was in the middle of finals and was grateful to have it all sorted well in advance. I was allocated a shared room with a really nice Lithuanian girl in 'les résidences Ornano' which is in the 28th arrondissement. It's not the nicest area but it's cheap, there's a huge intermarché supermarket right on the doorstep, it's about 10 minutes' walk away from the Sacré Coeur and right on the metro stop so there are lots of redeeming features. The room was 33m² so although we didn't get much privacy, we at least weren't right on top of each other. There was also a small 'kitchen' area which consisted of a fridge and 2 hobs (I bought a kettle through desperation for English tea) and a bathroom. The part of the building I was in was mainly for Erasmus students which made meeting people who were also keen to make friends really easy. Most people had roommates but I didn't hear of anyone having a problem. A shared room costs about €275 a month which is really really cheap for Paris but you can request a single room but I think it costs around €500 a month.

Travel and Transport

The Paris metro uses the Navigo card system which is much like the Oyster card. Unfortunately they only do annual student Navigo passes which is not worth the price so I ended up getting a monthly one and renewing it each month. Luckily my hospital reimbursed 1/3 of the price if I produced proof of payment which took the edge off. You can buy them at the information stations in the metro (I went to Saint Lazare) but you need proof of address. There are no weekend passes available so when I had friends visiting they generally bought a book of 10 metro tickets which works out fairly cheaply, especially compared to the London underground prices!

Finances

I was lucky enough to get paid on all of my placements- I received around €200 a month which definitely helped. A great excuse to buy myself something nice with my first pay cheque! I had to open a French bank account in order for them to pay me so I was advised by the medical school to

open an account with BNP Paribas which was really easy to do- I just had to present proof of address (which the university halls can just print off for you very quickly) and some ID. The Erasmus grant was also a great help financially; we were given approximately €300 a month on a preloaded mastercard 'cashpassport' which works exactly like a debit card, with a €900 instalment initially in January and another €300 in June. I did find that I got through most of the initial €900 in the first 6 weeks with rent and various other expenses to do with setting up, but after that spending became a little more stable! There's no denying that Paris is expensive so it is definitely worth watching your pennies.. making friends and having a good time ends up costing a lot as there are lots of nights out, eating out and alcohol! I would advise to cut back on spending wherever possible, such as with food shopping, so as to leave enough money for socialising or travelling or whatever you'd prefer to be doing. One bonus is that most of the monuments and tourist attractions in Paris are free for under-25s from the european union- for example Versailles, going up l'arc de triomphe and many of the museums which is ideal especially when having visitors.

The 4 months goes surprisingly quickly so try to decide what you'd like to do most at the beginning and start planning as soon as possible. I had all these plans in my head to travel to places outside of Paris and to visit friends in Lyon etc but never actually got round to it because I got too caught up doing other things. Don't underestimate how quickly the time will go and definitely make sure you make the most of it!

Useful Contacts

Tifenn JEGO

tifenn.jego@parisdescartes.fr

Relations Internationales

Accueil et information des étudiants

Faculté de Médecine

Université Paris Descartes

Tifenn is absolutely lovely and nothing was too much trouble for her. She's in charge of erasmus medical students and I really appreciated having her to help with any issues or questions we had. Even though she was fairly new to the job she made an effort to help us out in any way she could. Total babe.

Olga SEKANE

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Olga Sekane

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Olga Sekane is in charge of international students for Paris Descartes. I haven't met her in person but she always replied quickly and efficiently to emails and came across as very helpful.

Crous

service-international@crous-paris.fr

Crous de Paris

Service Logement et International - 2ème étage

39 avenue Georges Bernanos, 75005 Paris

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murielle.charreau@crous-paris.fr

Crous is the accommodation service which paris descartes uses, although you can request accommodation by emailing them directly. The official email address is the service-international one but if you get no response (as they're fairly disorganised), email Murielle Charreau (email above) who works for them and is very helpful.

Conclusion

Although the idea of living abroad for 4 months may seem daunting at first, you'll be surprised how quickly you settle in and your daily routine feels normal. I found I did lots of touristy things at the beginning but by the end I was living like a local. It's a really good opportunity between finals and starting your first F1 job to just completely change your way of life for a few months, go to a new place, meet new people and improve your language. It may be slightly stressful for the first 2 weeks or so but try to relax into it and have fun- you really are going to love it! Don't underestimate how well you speak French either. You should be at or near a C1 standard which is pretty high and definitely enough to get by both in hospital and in your social life. Don't let it knock you back if occasionally someone hears your accent and assumes you don't understand or doesn't want to help you- there are always going to be people like that wherever you go and there will also be plenty of people impressed with what you are doing and happy to help you. I am quite jealous of you all going to France as if I could I would 100% do it all again! Bonne chance et profitez bien de l'experience!