

European studies reflection – Feb 2nd 2015 – May 22nd 2015

Lyon, France

For me, it was a very tough but important choice deciding where to apply for my year 5 placement. Since starting European option in first year I had already been to France twice, for a month at a time, first to Nice and then Montpellier in the south of France. Each time, it had been the best month of that year. The main difference between those placements and the year 5 one, aside from the obvious length of placement, was that I was not going to be going with two of my best friends. For me going it alone, was an important but devastating choice. My main goal was to become fluent, or at least as fluent as I could in 4 months and I knew that my best shot at that would be without my closest friends, after all that was the main reason I wanted to do European option in the first place.

Each of the different universities, and the different cities offered different advantages, but my personal expertise is on Lyon.

I had been to Lyon once before, and knew that aside from its reputation for fantastic food, in fact the most Michelin starred restaurant in one city, it was like what Manchester is to London. A smaller city, easy to get around, not as expensive but plenty of variety for things to do and surrounded by other nice cities. And it was based on that and the great things I'd heard from previous years that I put it down as my first choice and crossed my fingers. Amazingly, I got my first choice and was interestingly even offered the opportunity to switch to Paris where my best friend was, which was due to exceptional circumstances, but the cost of living was what swayed me, plus I could always go to visit. This was another big advantage of Lyon, only two hours to Paris on the TGV and a little less to the south coast.

In the run up to leaving, I barely had time to give it a second thought. Finals were just around the corner and so I couldn't bring myself to think about where I was going to live or what I was going to pack when I was spending every waking moment revising. Try to resist the temptation to ignore all emails that arrive unceremoniously in your inbox during finals. Some of the emails we received during that time contained lots of important information including the list of official documents we needed to bring with us, which was unwise to ignore. Similarly, be aware that French offices seem to accept, almost exclusively, actual postal mail and so give yourself the week or so that you'll need for things to arrive before any deadlines. The University of Lyon also looks very favourably on official stamps, so should you need to send anything important, especially anything called "attestation de...", make sure to get it stamped with the University of Manchester stamp. Many paperwork problems I had were solved with an official stamp.

Arrival in Lyon

I was advised to arrive in Lyon a week before the official placement start date, to sort out all the paperwork and but the seemingly pointless but actually very important insurance. This was not at all necessary. A day or two would have sufficed, but equally preparer yourselves for French official establishment working hours that consist quite often of being closed for a few hours over lunch, possibly also closed all day on Monday and perhaps also one random afternoon of the week. So except to make a few pointless journeys. Try not to let it get you down, it's all part of the experience and actually its quite good to be thrown in the deep end and have to speak so much French to try and sort things out.

The first thing to try and get done is get your student card and the certificate of studenthood. This is very much your golden ticket for everything else you need. My personal experience involved about 4

hours of walking back and forth from building to building with no directions and no idea what I was trying to get, mostly because I did not buy my SMERRA insurance beforehand, without which you can't get your card. Eventually it will get done and with your student card you can purchase the all-important metro card pass. For the year 2015, we paid €28.80 per month, which will take you to almost any hospital you need to get to, and with a bit of careful planning (do NOT buy it at the end of January because it's sold per calendar month!) you will save a lot of money.

Accommodation

Despite earlier saying that I spent no time planning my trip during finals, one thing I did do was sort myself out a place to live. The advice I was given was to find somewhere on airbnb for a couple of weeks and then use those weeks to find somewhere else on a website like appartager.com. I wouldn't say it was unwise to do what I did, which was to book my accommodation for 2 months with the possibility of extending it, because this worked out great for me, but there have been horror stories too of why this isn't a good idea.

I chose to live in the quartier called the Croix Rousse. It is basically a village in its own right, but a fantastic location and walking to the main centre of Lyon took me only about 15 minutes from my house. It is also at the top of one of Lyons many hills, which means getting back after a late night, when the last metro has gone would be a struggle if you aren't a keen walker. I loved it.

Rather than renting a room with students, I rented a room from a French family. The plan was total language immersion and having all the home necessities available without having to buy them e.g. bedsheets and crockery. This was possibly one of the riskiest decisions I made, naturally in the pre-finals panic when I wasn't thinking straight. It could easily have gone either way but overall, turned out to be how I made my best, and hopefully lifelong French friend in Lyon. I chose to live with a single mother of two small children. I guess I thought that my experience as having been an aupair of children of a similar age would help me. I don't actually recommend living with children, but I was certain that it did help my French. Children aren't afraid to correct everything you say and even just reading them bedtime stories means your brain is working in French until the evening. My lady lady and I got on famously and spent whole evenings just exchanging stories and talking. It was a wonderful experience and actually far more useful for improving French than anything I learnt at the hospital. Also I wasn't afraid to make mistakes in front of her which helps and anyway, mistakes you do make are apparently "mignon". When my contract was up I extended it immediately and actually got a very good deal in terms of what I got for my money. So my risk paid off, but if you do decide to do something like this, you have to remember that small children go to sleep very early and wake early which meant I would often get back from hospital and they would already be in bed, lie ins weren't possible even on weekends or days off, and late nights would consist of sneaking around and trying to be silent. Skyping family and friends back home was also only possible on weekends or when they were away but also I didn't have much privacy. They are fantastic children though and I'll be glad to stay in touch with them as they grow up. I really did and do still feel like a part of that family.

Some important considerations for accommodation include

1. How close you are to transports links. Although the Lyon transport network , TCL, is excellent, there are some very very cold days in the winter when you first arrive so it's worth being near to the metro, especially if you choose to live in the croix rousse or fouviere quartiers which are both up quite steep hills.

2. How central you are. We were given three placements over the 4 month period, each in a different hospital. Living at either end of the city might mean you, as I did, spend more than two hours in total commuting some days. Having said this, the transport is so good, unless you opt for either extreme, this shouldn't be much of a problem.
3. How much French you want to speak. If you want to be forced to speak French at home, living with French students is a good idea, but just be aware that if you live with other international students, you may find you speak in English because it's the language you all have in common.
4. What you want your lifestyle to be like. For example, I was never going to be going clubbing every night and staying out until the early hours, so living with small children was ok for me. If that is what you're hoping for, I would avoid the quieter areas and live in a student area instead.
5. How much money you want to spend. None of the Manchester students this year stayed in university accommodation, but lots of the people I met through the Erasmus program did and said it was fine considering how little they were paying for it.

Free time

When I first arrived, I was quite overwhelmed by having a whole new city to explore. The amount of free time I got was very variable depending on the placement. My favourite thing were

1. Markets – So much of my free time was spent at the croix rousse market where I quickly became a local. It is a cheaper, fresher and much more sociable option for food shopping, and the fresh fruit and veg is genuinely a fraction of the supermarket prices if you shop around and become loyal to the same stall owner. The cheese selections are fantastic and you can ask to try and type you want, so I regularly did! The market is open every morning except Mondays and quickly became my Sunday morning routine. I did in fact discover that one of my patients had a stall on the market, which isn't surprising given how big it is, but once I got over the original shock, it didn't seem to matter. Another market I frequented was the one on quai du Rhône, which is just as atmospheric but also open until late on thursdays.
2. Cafés and restaurants – Lyon is such a foodie city, it would have been impossible to eat in every restaurant during the time we were there, but we managed to go to a good few. Eating out in Lyon isn't expensive either, if you know how to choose smartly, avoiding the touristy typical 'bouchons' and taking advantage of the plat du jour. I would advise looking at the menu before you go because in some places, there was only one option for that day. Also don't be afraid to call and book in advance as the locals also love to eat out.
3. Historic monuments – during the first week, I went on the walking tour organised by the Erasmus program that was free, and had a chance to visit the many historic monuments worth seeing. Of note was the cathedral de notre dame, the basilica de fourviere and fountain in the place de terraux. This was also how I discovered the traboules, which are essentially disguised secret passages, all over Lyon that take you from street to street. Finding them is difficult without being shown where they are
4. Museums and galleries – entry to most of the museums and galleries is significantly reduced, if not completely free for students ages 18-25. I went to the temporary and permanent collections in the musee de beaux arts a few times on a rainy day. Lyon also boasts a newer museum at la confluence, which is its newest district that is worth a visit. There really is something for everyone.
5. Parks – one of things Lyon is most proud of is its park de la tete d'or. In this park there are some stunning botanical gardens and there is also a free zoo. Before going along with some

other international students I had randomly encountered on the metro one day, I had doubted that it would be a quality zoo but there were in fact lions, bears and giraffes as well as lots of other exotic animals. If you don't have a strong stomach I wouldn't advise it however as the conditions really are terrible and I found the whole experience quite upsetting. The animals have hardly any room at all.

6. Sunny afternoons – the weather during the 4 months that I was in Lyon changed drastically from sub zero to 30 degrees. I was assured that this was usual but in true French style, many of the doctors insisted that I should “profiter – to make the most of” – the sunny afternoons so on particularly nice days we were allowed to leave a little earlier and lie by the banks of the river to sunbathe and even participate in some slack lining. Most sunny afternoons were passed in this way.
7. Viewpoints - one of my favourite thing to do on a nice day or on a balmy evening is walk up to the top of the Croix Rousse steps to look over the whole city from the amazing viewpoint. I regularly picnicked there too, along with what seems like half of Lyon on a nice day. Another great viewpoint is that from Fourvière. You can really get an idea of the size of Lyon and see most of its famous monuments from there.

Hospital life in France

The role of medical students in France turned out to be very different to what I was expecting. In England, almost 2 and a half years as a medical student in a clinical environment had led me to the conclusion that we, as students, go to the hospital to learn, and that learning skills and how to manage patients is a priority and if we aren't able to achieve this, the placement is not a useful one.

In France, I quickly realised that the hospitals rely on the students to function. Students have specific practical responsibilities and without the students, the system would collapse (what do they do in the summer holidays I wondered!). French students seemed to take this role very seriously, and only once did I dare to suggest that seeing as there was nothing to do on the ward that we might go and practise examinations. This was met with such horror that I wanted to learn and not work I never suggested it again.

Obstetrics and gynaecology at HFME

This was my first placement and having turned up a week early, they let me start early too. Unfortunately I had a pretty bad sore throat and by the time I showed up to introduce myself on the first day, the secretary (who seem to deal with everything) thought I was completely mute because I had completely lost my voice. I proceeded to be shown to a ward where, with my thick booklet of tasks to complete and my rigid and complex timetable in hand I began my placement. Perhaps it's only in this hospital but I was also asked to wear a surgical face mask for the two weeks that I had lost my voice for, so as not to infect the patients. My relationships with patients and staff alike were very difficult for this reason. They couldn't see me smile and I couldn't speak so I wasn't really given much to do and on one occasion I was even told off quite badly for not showing enough enthusiasm. That was pretty awful but the midwife who had gotten so angry had a reputation for not being a big fan of medical students. All of these struggles were just teething problems and once I could speak again it was much better. I wasn't prepared for the many 12 hour days I did, leaving before sunrise and getting home after sunset, some days without evening getting a lunch break, but it was all good practise. I did find that after about 6pm my French would significantly deteriorate in quality and by the time I got home I could barely string a sentence together. This gets better too.

I had the shock of my life when at the end of the fourth week of my placement I was required to sit an oral exam on what I'd learnt during the placement so far. This was apparently crucial for them to sign me off. I was also asked to write 8 case reports, each of which took me a couple of hours to do, according to the templates they had given us. In the end this all went ok but was definitely a very stressful experience. In the year that I did this placement, we were not required to pass any of the exams we sat while we were in France and I was in fact the only person from Manchester who was made, by my placement to sit one.

Infectious diseases at the Croix Rousse

This placement was amazing, not only because of the variety of things I saw but also because medical students had a lot of responsibility for their patients and I was given my own patient who I was able to follow up and see regularly. There were teaching ward rounds weekly and I was able to attend clinics too where I felt lots of big livers and spleens and saw a lot of tropical diseases I never saw in England like amoebic liver abscesses. At the end of this placement also there was a short casual oral exam about antiretrovirals and antibiotics which was easy to answer given we also had weekly formal teaching sessions.

Gastroenterology at the Croix Rousse

This was also a fantastic placement, simply because of how practical it was. I had lots of opportunities to examine patients and as there were only two of us on the whole ward for 30 beds I had lots of opportunities to put in ascitic drains and taps. The junior doctors were also very inclusive. It must be said however, there were things you could go to that weren't useful like for example the MDTs where they spoke almost exclusively in abbreviations and everything was so fast and specialised that even the French junior doctors had no idea what was going on. There was also small group teaching (often there were only 2 of us!) which was good because it forced you participate when there was no one else to hide behind, but not so good because of the same reason!!

Conclusion

I had good days, great days, bad days and days where I wished I could just go home where everything would be in English but overall I think it was the best thing I did in my degree. I wasn't at all ready to leave when it came to it, but the atmosphere just before I left, where everyone knows that we had come to the end of an era, was a wonderful one to spend in a place like Lyon. I didn't come back completely fluent like I had secretly hoped, but definitely with a much better idea of how everything works in France so I could at least make an informed decision on whether I would want to or even could work in France in the future. Perhaps optimistically I also came back with a few new friends for life and certainly a greater network of people I know in France. There are a lot of administrative things that will be waiting for you when you get back, so try not to ignore these when you're abroad. All the other students have already sat their prescribing exam and had their exit portfolio interviews, but as ES students we have a few extra days after we get back to get all of this done. Once you get over the initial culture shock, I hope you find, as I did that Lyon might just be one of the nicest places to be an English student.

Useful links

<http://www.petitpaume.com/>

<http://www.tcl.fr/en>

<http://www.crous-lyon.fr/html/>

<http://spiralconnect.univ-lyon1.fr/>