

Year Abroad at ULB

The Department

The maths department is situated on the La Plaine campus which is undisputedly the prettier of the ULB campuses with trees and lawns surrounding the buildings, making the walk in everyday quite enjoyable. The buildings themselves leave a bit to be desired but function well enough. The lecturers were all pretty standard maths lecturer fare; intelligent if not immensely personable; and the small class sizes (from <10 to 20ish max) made it really easy to ask questions when stuck. There were also many mandatory exercise classes with a phd student supervisor which were incredibly useful. Unfortunately, when I had a problem with an older lecturer engaging in bullying of myself and other students, the maths department were slow to make any response and in the end failed even to get an assurance that it wouldn't happen again from the lecturer.

The Course

The course is taught entirely in French, except some masters modules in english, but I couldn't find any that seemed possible with my level of knowledge, mathematicians who have taken a less pure maths focused set of modules might fare better than I did, but if you can't speak French, or more importantly, do undergraduate maths in French, then you're in trouble. That said, I only had A level French behind me and practically no French training since secondary school on arrival in Brussels, and, after taking their incredibly cheap French language course through August (75 euros for just under 80 hours) I was prepared enough for the course.

As for content, you must take 60% maths modules and I found this very restrictive, the maths options per year are completely fixed, every student chooses either physics economics or computer science, but there is no choice within each strand. While this did not apply to me, it meant there were few modules to choose from, plus some had statistics or physics prerequisites I didn't know, so my module choice was further limited. I managed to cobble together a mix of 2nd year and 3rd year pure maths modules with some computer science and first year economics modules, which I mostly enjoyed, but this did mean I was repeating modules like metric spaces and algebra 2.

Social Life

Unfortunately the university's social club options are confined to groups called 'cercles' which hold initiations over the first month of term which seem to me to be repugnant. I've heard stories from students who have done them that the treatment of prospective initiates is terrible, especially for women, many tasks were of an explicitly sexual nature and I heard many stories of girls being forced to tears. I am sure this is not true for all cercles, however it seems that there don't exist many options outside of the cercles, and cercles are arranged by subject area, so if you get one of the bad cercles, you've not got much choice.

Fortunately, the Erasmus organised events were great for meeting new people and allowed me to bypass the lack of university provided clubs.

The City

I loved Brussels, its pedestrianised centre, low buildings, cobbled streets and numerous parks give it a very welcoming vibe that made it great fun walking round the city, listening to buskers and eating Brussels' incredible fast food. One caveat on this is that I believe my experience was heightened quite a bit by being a guy, a large percentage of women I met in Brussels from various European cities reported extraordinarily high levels of street harassment throughout Brussels compared with other cities.

In terms of culture, the selection of great museums on offer in Brussels is very large, I went to a different museum every fortnight and had many more I wanted to visit by the time I left. They cost anywhere from 2 to 14 euros, but average out at about a fiver a trip.

On the night life front, the variety again was striking, though it does take a while to get used to European music tastes.

The food here was incredible, not immensely accommodating to dietary requirements (all fries in Brussels are fried in animal fat), but you've not lived till you've had frites and waffles on Grand Place.

Accommodation and costs

My rent was 450 euros a month including bills, but I had friends paying anywhere from 300 euros to 650. 450 netted me a spacious living room, an acceptable kitchen and a sizeable bedroom with double bed in a 2 bedroom apartment 5 minutes from the university. I found this through facebook, as I'm advised most people do, there are many facebook groups that you'll find by searching BXL a Louer. Other options include brukot.be and similar aggregate sites. All the above offer 'colocation' which involves being interviewed by existing flatmates to fill an extra slot, as I did with my flatmate, and then being selected from a group of applicants, this can mean a prolonged search process, but usually results in amiable pairing and is the standard means of acquiring accommodation in Brussels. I tried to find an empty place for me and a friend to live in, but to no success and I hear it's difficult to find empty places.

In terms of transport, the university is 30 minutes bus journey from the centre, or a slightly longer bike ride, fortunately, ULB students get a reduced rate on a yearlong bus pass of 120 euros, which gets you unlimited travel everywhere in the city except the airport.

For groceries, I was mostly vegetarian/vegan throughout the year (except for the frites) so your mileage may vary if you eat a good amount of meat but I'd say I spent 40ish euros a week on food I ate at home. If you start eating out or getting fast food, that'll skyrocket fast, ditto for buying ready meals.