

2025-2026
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Reflective Learning Diary - Geneva

(Intercalated year abroad at the Université de Genève)

Part one: what have I gained from doing a year abroad?

Through immersion in a francophone city, I have significantly improved my language capabilities across all key areas. I can comprehend texts more deeply, listen to and understand more complex passages, and more confidently engage in a conversation. I have particularly learnt a lot of new vocabulary, especially subject specific vocabulary from my modules.

I have become more culturally aware, due to exposure to different perspectives, customs, and ways of life. This has occurred through living in Geneva and visiting many other places throughout the year, where I have attended significant cultural events that I would never have known about without studying abroad. I have thoroughly enjoyed travelling whenever possible.



I have made so many memories and tried so many new things, including skiing, snowboarding, and taking ice skating lessons.

The most notable changes within myself are that my independence and confidence have developed hugely which was primarily by learning to cope with homesickness and a major life transition in a new place on my own. Finding community in an unfamiliar environment has been so rewarding. I have met lots of new people, many of whom will remain a huge part of my life moving forward.

I have enjoyed pursuing my academic interests without the pressure of the grade counting towards my degree and feel more prepared to begin my 3rd year at Warwick, since I now have more experience studying at this level and have been exposed to a wider variety of maths.

Doing a year abroad was one of the best decisions I have ever made, and I have grown so much as a result. It is an experience that I will never forget.

Part two: what are the benefits of living in Geneva/Switzerland?



Geneva is a compact, walkable, and highly international city with a strong café culture and excellent public transport (free to under 25s). Here are some of the most well-known attractions:

- Jet d'eau
- Cathedral Saint-Pierre and its archaeological site
- CERN (I recommend booking a tour)
- UN building (I recommend booking a tour)
- Patek Philippe Museum
- La Jonction
- Jardin botanique
- Mont Salève (check the last cable car time!)
- Mur des Réformateurs

And some of my recommendations:

- Oh Martine!
- Gelatomania
- Parc aux animaux du Bois-de-la-Bâtie
- Bongo Joe Records
- Mr Pickwick (pub quiz)
- La pignata (10 CHF pizza, where 1CHF≈£0.94)
- Plage des Eaux-Vives
- Carouge



Cultural Events

Switzerland has a rich local history which is celebrated through various events.

Rallye du chocolat, Geneva: A self-guided tour of the local artisan chocolate makers.

Escalade festival, Geneva: A parade to celebrate Geneva's defence against a French attack in 1602; attendees eat chocolate 'Marmites' (soup pots) filled with sweets, which are traditionally smashed open between two people's hands.



Desalpes, multiple locations: Traditional Swiss/Austrian festival where cows descend from mountain pastures wearing flower crowns – I saw this in St-Luc and Blonay.

Other cultural experiences that would be available to you:

- Tulip festival in Morges
- May 1st worker's rights procession - more prominent than in the UK
- Christmas markets are massive thing in Switzerland and neighbouring countries
- Winter sport destinations are easily accessible
- Musée d'art et histoire (Geneva), The Olympic Museum (Lausanne) and many other museums across the country
- Local cuisine: fondue, raclette, and chocolate

Travel

Switzerland is extremely well-connected by train. There is a 'friends travel pass' for under 25s where four young people can travel anywhere in Switzerland all day for only 20 CHF. My favourite places that I have visited in Switzerland this year and why are as follows:

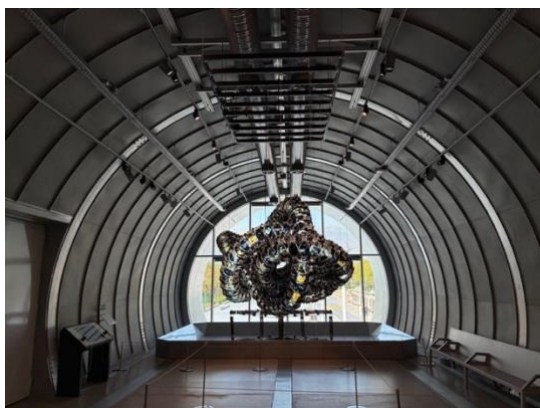
- Oeschinenensee (hiking, rowing)
- Zermatt (the Matterhorn)
- Saas-Fee (snowy mountains, rotating panoramic restaurant)
- Interlaken (marmots – a rodent native to alpine regions)
- Gruyère (cheese and chocolate factories, medieval castle and town)
- Nax (via ferrata)
- Basel (art galleries)
- Lugano (amazing views, lakeside walks)
- Melide (miniture Switzerland)



I also had the opportunity to travel to different countries, including France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein, and the Netherlands. This was possible for me due to Switzerland's central location within Europe.

Tip: Book Swiss trains well in advance to get super saver tickets and look into the GA half fare pass if you plan to travel a lot.

Part three: Academics



Ranking among the top 100 universities globally, Université de Genève (UNIGE) is particularly renowned for its research in the natural sciences. I have really enjoyed experiencing a different university culture but have faced some challenges in navigating differences in curriculum, teaching style, and examinations between here and Warwick. An academic cultural difference is that all modules are graded out of 6, where 4 is a pass.

My modules

Semester 1 Modules: Pavages, Algebraic Number Theory, Dimers and Their Friends, Introduction to the Representation of Finite Groups, Français Oral B2, Français Lundi B2.

Semester 2 Modules: Géométrie 1, Group Theory by examples, Histoire de l'Architecture II, Français Oral B2, Français Lundi B2.

My favourite modules were Introduction to the Representation of Finite Groups and Histoire de l'Architecture II.

The teaching style is very different because there are significantly less students in the maths department than at Warwick, so the lectures feel more like seminars. There isn't as much standardisation across modules and a lot of details about each course are decided by their lecturer. Some have assignments throughout the term for credit, some have assignments you are encouraged to do but not for credit, some don't have any assignments. Some maths modules were taught in French and some in English. Some lecturers got the class to vote for their preferred language. All first and second year maths modules are taught in French. Most other subjects are taught in French. Studying maths in French wasn't as difficult as I expected once I had learnt a few key words and commonly used abbreviations. Warwick states that you must have B1 French to study at UNIGE, which I think is very reasonable because without this you would struggle to follow the modules in French and you would struggle to find enough modules in English to follow courses that have sufficient credits. Some lecturers of French courses allow you to submit your assignments in English but others don't.

Almost all the maths modules have a 1 hour 45 mins seminar followed immediately by a 1 hour 45 mins lecture, which can get tiring, especially if you have two in one day. In my first semester I had 8 and a half hours on a Monday, which I regret not spreading throughout the week more.

Pavages and Dimers and Their Friends had their prerequisites listed online as the first two years of bachelors. However, the first two years of bachelors at UNIGE have two compulsory geometry modules so as someone who didn't take the optional geometry module at Warwick, I had some gaps to fill as I went along and sometimes struggled. Since grades did not count towards the degree, my priority shifted to depth of learning in areas of future specialisation rather than maximising grades across all modules.

Tip: Leave more time to write assignments in French as it takes a while to get used to.

Language learning

Every exchange student is able to do two Maison de langue modules in French free of charge. These were hugely beneficial for me. In particular, I enjoyed weekly debates in Français Oral B2 and completing a group project which was a presentation on whether Emily in Paris is a good representation of Parisian culture for Français Lundi B2.

I found a language exchange partner through a university led programme called tandem. This involved meeting a native French speaker once a week, usually in a café, to speak French (for me) and English (for her). This was a great way to consolidate the new vocabulary and grammar I learnt in my classes and see some less formal expressions. We often played language games such as bananagrams to keep this engaging. I strongly recommend that you sign up for this if you choose UNIGE. I was very lucky to find someone I get on well with fairly quickly but through discussions with friends, I discovered that you may have to message a few people before you find someone suitable.

The university also hosts optional, free evening French workshops on Mondays and Wednesdays, which are run by volunteers.



There were lots of public engagement talks hosted at the university in French. I attended one about quantum physics. The public library also regularly hosted talks in French – mostly about art, history, and literature.

Independently of UNIGE, I improved my language competencies by attending a local monthly book club called 'Livremoi', where I discussed complex literature with mostly native speakers and then we all watched the author being interviewed. I felt out of my depth here, but I am still glad that I attempted this.

I found it very interesting to learn different words used in different regions, as there are some things Swiss francophones say differently to other francophone cultures.

Tip: Many people in Geneva default to English when they hear an accent. Actively seek out structured French-speaking opportunities - they don't always arise organically as I initially anticipated.

Exams

There are two exam seasons, one at the end of each semester, which differs from Warwick. This makes it particularly important to stay on top of the work in the first semester, especially if you want to enjoy the Christmas break. The exams are very different as most of them are oral. Again, the specifics are different for each module, but you may or may not be allowed to do this in English, it may or may not be open book, and you may or may not be given a list of topics in advance. Usually, you are given 30 minutes of preparation time where you have to solve questions and then 30 minutes where you present your solutions on the chalkboard and are asked follow-up questions (it is scary but not nearly as bad as it sounds!). This is also not specific to UNIGE, but a frequent practice in mainland European universities. I was relieved to have the examination for the language modules out the way before the main exam season each semester.

Pastoral support

The pastoral support is limited, although I have noticed that this is something UK universities particularly excel at and compared to the other universities of people I know studying abroad, I wouldn't say UNIGE is any worse. There was a very informative and well-organised information event at the start of the first semester, which gave all the exchange students some much needed guidance regarding academics and start of year admin. Beyond this, the exchange coordinator manages thousands of students so for specific queries, expect to contact a chain of people to find the right source. It was reassuring that I still had my personal tutor and the maths office at Warwick to contact.

Tip: Be proactive in making sure you have registered correctly for modules and exams (especially if cross-faculty) as there may be differences for exchange students and sometimes the university doesn't seem to have a clear procedure for exchange students but will be willing to help if you contact them.



Part four: the logistics of moving to and living in Geneva

Moving abroad can seem scary, but there are ways to reduce this. I found that doing research and preparation and staying on top of important admin reduced my anxiety. I was particularly uncertain about being able to integrate into society and how I would afford to live in such an infamously expensive country.

Society culture is not the same as it is at Warwick but there some clubs, especially for sports; these sometimes cost a lot.



Erasmus Student Network (ESN)

The ESN section in Geneva is very active with regular social events and organised trips (these are usually much cheaper than travelling alone or in smaller groups) and is one of the best ways to meet people quickly at the start of the year. It was central to building a social network for me, especially in the first term. I particularly suggest making the most of welcome week events they run, otherwise it can feel harder to integrate in existing group dynamics. People became close surprisingly quickly. That said, I kept making friends long into the year.

My favourite event was the Swiss Train Rally, which was a collaborative event involving many Swiss ESN sections, where we completed challenges in surprise cities. When we got on the train, we didn't know which stop would be our destination until we solved a puzzle.

Finances

I wasn't sure if I would be able to afford a year abroad at first; this almost deterred me from doing one, but there are almost always systems in place that allocate appropriate amounts of funding based on location, household income, etc. You can get a maintenance loan and tuition loan (tuition is much cheaper than in the UK) from Student Finance England as usual but there are also bursaries available dependent on eligibility such as the Warwick bursary and Turing Scheme. Every mobility student coming from a British university is eligible to obtain the Swiss-European Mobility Programme (SEMP) scholarship. To receive the SEMP scholarship, it is necessary to open a Swiss bank account. This was fairly easy to do. Most students I knew used UBS. TWINT is very common form of payment in Switzerland; you can use this with a range of banks.

Most things are more expensive in Switzerland so it is important to spend mindfully, but it is possible to minimise costs by planning well and finding the right places to shop.

Lidl and Aldi are the cheapest supermarkets, but the prices still aren't quite comparable to their British stores.

UNIGE canteens provide filling, healthy meals at a discounted rate of 5 CHF for each student once a day.

Note that you are not allowed to work with a student residence permit for at least 6 months and even then it can be difficult to get permission.

Tip: Research the Green Travel Fund before booking transport there, as you may be able to get a discount. Also, keep proof of purchase for travel in order to be reimbursed by Student Finance England (beyond a fixed cost).

Accommodation

In general, Geneva is a safe, clean city, and there is no region I would particularly avoid living in.

Finding a well-priced accommodation can be difficult. It is significantly cheaper to live in a student residence or sublet than a studio. I applied to a lot of student accommodations and only got accepted into two. One of my friends didn't get accepted into any and has lived in an Airbnb all year.

The most popular student residences among exchange students that I know are Cité, ECLA (France), and my own residence, Centre St-Boniface (CSB). CSB is priced very decently for a range of room sizes. I had the smallest room and still found that I had enough space; I even had a balcony. It is in an amazing location very close to the main university buildings. However, I shared a kitchen with 120 people, which I know a lot of people would struggle to do. I also had limited kitchen storage and no freezer.

Since Geneva is so close to France, many students including exchange students live in France and commute. This can definitely save money but I would recommend that you check that it doesn't affect your eligibility for any funding first. Fortunately, wherever you live locally, transport is usually reliable and with few delays, strikes, or other disruptions.

Tip: Be careful about where you are looking for accommodation. There are a lot of accommodation scams, especially for sublets and studios. I used reverse google image searches to rule out some listings which came up with a result in a completely different country.



Admin

- You will need to apply for a residence permit within two weeks of entering the country (different procedure if you live in France).
- Expect this to take a long time to arrive – mine arrived just before Christmas.
- Although personal liability insurance is not required by law, many landlords and student residences require it.
- It is important to get health insurance within 3 months of arriving or the Service de l'assurance maladie (SAM) will sign you up for one, which is nowhere near the cheapest option.
- It is not necessary but very helpful to get a Swiss phone number for admin purposes.

Coping with change:

It's normal to take a while to get used to a new place. You may experience homesickness or culture shock. Some people I know improved their homesickness by keeping in regular contact with their families and visiting home. I tried this and it made me feel worse, so it is important to find what works for you. What helped me was keeping busy, forming new connections locally, and my family and friends coming to visit me once I had settled in.

I felt settled after around a month, but this varied a lot from person to person. Coming back after Christmas also took me a while to get used to, especially because a lot of my friends from the first semester went to study elsewhere or returned home.



Notable cultural differences include:

- Switzerland uses a Type C plug socket, which is not the same as those used in the UK, France or Germany!
- A lot more shops including supermarkets are closed on Sundays – you can only get food at small newsagents or restaurants, which can both be expensive.
- Quieter than other cities at night due to noise restrictions.
- Swiss people are known for being somewhat reserved, with a direct communication style.
- Punctuality is highly valued.