

Deciding to go

I had a vague idea of going on a year abroad when I was applying for university, but had completely forgotten about it until it started being mentioned at the start of 2nd year. I had many doubts and fears about spending a year abroad, but decided to start the process off with completing the first form, and with each subsequent step I continually told myself it wasn't too late to pull out. Winding forward to now, a year later, while the experience had its ups and downs, like any other year does, I never found myself desperate to be back in England, and thoroughly enjoyed the entire experience. My experience will be quite different to many other people's however, as I didn't go alone, but with my boyfriend. This obviously made the transition easier, and although we must have spoken more English together than most Erasmus students will speak, I have no regrets, and my French still improved dramatically. The decision of where exactly to go wasn't a big one. I wanted to be in a francophone country, preferably France, but not in Paris as its size somewhat overwhelmed me. Otherwise I wasn't especially concerned, and ended up in Strasbourg, which I found to be the perfect city. It's fairly small for a city, meaning it's easy to get around, and has a wonderful tram system, and more bike lanes and accommodations for cycling than I've seen anywhere else. It's one of the most beautiful cities I've been to; the Christmas market and decorations were stunning. Being by the French/German border, Strasbourg's location lends itself to travelling. Taking a long walk or the tram over into the nearest German town, Kehl, was always fun.

French Level

I took French GCSE in school and did well, but didn't keep up with French in any way for the next three years. During the second year of university I followed the French 2 course provided by the language centre. I had no idea I would go to France the following year when I decided to take this course, but it worked out very well, as it reminded me of the GCSE knowledge I'd forgotten, and extended that basis a small amount. My French level was very basic when I left England. I'd spent the summer attempting to improve my level on my own, but I found these months of work were comparatively insignificant when I got there. The experience of having to communicate with people, and hold conversations was very daunting, and for the first few weeks, conversations felt painfully hard work and were really difficult (I have to thank the poor people in charge of university admin who kindly listened as long as necessary (ie very long!) for me to get my message across). I enrolled in the university provided French course at their language centre while I was there (there are options for taking this for credit or not, I opted to take them for credit). I would definitely recommend going to these, as they are free lessons provided for you, but I would warn you that these are, as expected, very different to French lessons taken in England. The class size was on average about 20 people as not everyone turned up every week, and the classes were completely mixed ability. Classes consisted of self-study, and work on three small projects assigned per term. There was one teacher present, but I found often she was busy with other tasks for a large portion of the class, but there was a variety of textbooks available to help with self-study.

Before Leaving

There are quite a few forms to fill out, but it's completely manageable and the Study Abroad Team at Warwick are very helpful if you're ever unsure. I would recommend being as organised as possible; I found, as suggested by previous students, having

scans saved online as well as hard copies of any important documents (passport, ID photo etc) useful.

The Move

This was the most overwhelming part of the year by far. Once the first few weeks/month was over, not only did admin tasks die down, but familiarity with the city, the university and the accommodation meant I felt more secure and settled. My situation with accommodation will be different than most people's as my boyfriend and I wanted to stay together so opted out of university accommodation. We arrived a few weeks before term started and started out staying in a reasonably priced hotel (called itself an 'apparthotel' as it had a kitchenette in the room allowing us to cook for ourselves) for about 7 nights. We were very lucky to find a flat share with a little French family. I think talking with the family was the thing that helped my French the most. Not only did it mean plenty of French conversation even at home, but they were excellent with pointing out my frequent mistakes, helping with pronunciation and accent, and any questions I had about the language.

Term 1

I found that until I asked for it, there was little help with forms to fill out, module choices etc. Although not the normal first point of contact, I found Charles Frances, who was head of third year maths, to be very kind, and helpful with module choices. His English is practically perfect, which can be helpful at the beginning of the year when your French level/confidence level might be shakier, to avoid confusion and ensure the year starts off well.

In Strasbourg, and I believe in the rest of France, each normal module taken (worth the standard number of credits) consists of one two-hour lecture and one three-hour class per week. Examination for each normal module is in the form of three exams distributed throughout the term; two one-hour exams roughly 5 and 10 weeks in (but timings can vary a lot), and a final two-hour exam at the end of term, about a week after lectures end.

During the first term I took two second year modules (Algebra S4 and Geometry S4) and two third year modules (Calculus S5 and Topology S5). The S4 modules (semester 4, so normally year 2 term 2) were small classes (no bigger than 30 students?) as they were mostly people retaking the modules. This meant it was less intimidating to talk and ask questions. I found the content to be mostly repeated from previous years, but presented in very different ways. I took the S5 modules alongside normal third year students, so lectures had ~100 students, but the classes were split into groups of 20-40 students (depending on the module and timetabling). Personally I found the difficulty of the modules was more dependant on my prior knowledge of the subject/prerequisite ideas, and my strengths/weaknesses in maths, than on whether the module was classified as second year or third year.

I was very worried about struggling with the language barrier before starting the courses, but actually found that even though I couldn't understand a lot of what the lecturers said for the first month or so, their handwriting was sufficiently legible to allow me to read along and copy down notes without too many issues. I found once I got to grips with a few key phrases, I could easily get by with very basic French. There are no printed notes for most modules, so attending lectures and producing your own notes is vital. Maths must be the most lenient subject for language skills; I found as long as people marking work could understand what I meant, there was no

penalty for poor French, and in fact 3 of my lecturers mentioned they wouldn't mind if I wanted to complete the exam in English.

Term 2

Registering for modules for term 2 was much easier, as I already had an idea of the level of different modules and which I preferred. I took all S6 (third year second term) modules, as there weren't more S4 modules of an appropriate level, and I found S5 modules aren't repeated in term 2. I took Measure and Integration, Probability, Geometry (which was only a half course, worth half the credits) and Differential Equations. I found the modules often started off easily, repeating things I had already studied, but by the end got harder. The exam style of having exams throughout the term meant you had to keep on top of your studies as you go, which was a good thing although annoying at times.

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to email me on rosie.barron1@ntlworld.com !