

Erasmus Report - Brussels 2013-2014

Why I did Erasmus

Deciding to do an Erasmus year is a big decision to make, there are obviously a lot of things that you'll be leaving behind, but the important thing to remember is that all the important things will be there when you get back.

I spoke to a lot of people who had done Erasmus before and they all had an amazing time and none of them regretted the decision. I think my biggest worry was about making friends in a different country, but during my first year I lived with a few people who were doing Erasmus at Warwick and we got on really well and still visit each other all the time. So that persuaded me that it could be done.



Belgium welcomes you!

well. I think the reason for this is that most people who want to improve their French decide to pick a university in France.

Belgium is a bilingual country. The northern half is Dutch speaking and the southern half is French speaking with Brussels being a french speaking island in the middle of the Dutch speaking part. Like me, you are unlikely to speak any Dutch, but it's not a problem at all. The Dutch speaking population also all speak excellent English, so it is easy to visit anywhere in the country.



One of the hundreds of chocolate shops in Brussels



On Erasmus you can adopt another country as your football team when England isn't doing very well!

Why Brussels?

Brussels wasn't actually my first choice, but now that I've been there I can't imagine going anywhere else. I was the first person to take up a spot at Brussels and I know that people have only just started going to Geneva as



Brussels is home to the European Parliament and is the centre of the EU and this

Brussels is home to lots of quirky people and places.

definitely has an effect on the atmosphere of the city. A lot of people living there are from different countries and of those people most are just staying for a short amount of time. Brussels has welcomed this and is one of the most diverse and open-minded places in the world. Everyone is desperate to introduce you to someone new who has just arrived and you're always being invited out to try new things. Italians will want to cook you their mother's risotto and

spanish people will invite you salsa dancing. Brussels is a place where you can experience almost every culture, and you are welcome to try any of them.

Finding Accommodation

I was really lucky with accommodation because I had a friend of a friend who was just finishing her Erasmus year as I started and I managed to get her old flat. Accommodation can be expensive in Brussels, but if you live a bit further out the centre and find a flat share it's not too bad. The Ixelles commune where I lived is the one between the university and the centre. It's a nice area to stay in. I recommend looking for accommodation which is 'tous charges compris' which means all of your bills and internet is included in the price. This saves you from trying to find providers and sort out all the paperwork. If there's one thing you should try to avoid in Belgium it's paperwork, it's a nightmare! Price-wise €400 a month will get you a nice flat share in a decent spot so don't be fooled into paying any more.

Meeting people

The only downside to my Erasmus experience was that the Erasmus society wasn't very active, so to begin with it was hard to meet new people. I recommend being proactive yourself. I put up a message on the Facebook group asking if anyone wanted to meet up and I had loads of people reply. I eventually met my really good friends that way even though they weren't Erasmus students.

As I mentioned before there are lots of young people from different countries passing through Brussels either on Erasmus or interning at one of the European Institutions, which makes it really easy to meet interesting people. Try to take everyone up on their offers to meet up, especially at the beginning, and make the effort to keep in touch with people you get on with.



The Belgian meal I cooked with my new friends

University Life

All of my lectures were in French at the ULB except one which was a masters course. The classes are very different to those at Warwick. There are only about 15 people in each year and they do almost all of their classes together, apart from their one option, where they split into 3 groups.



Parc Cinquantenaire - an excellent place for revision

At first I struggled with finding modules because only about 60% of what they do is maths and then they chose one option (economics, computer science or Physics) none of which I'd already done. In the end I managed to juggle my timetable so that I was taking just the maths modules from a few different years and also the French course for Foreign students.

If you had a strong interest in one of their option areas you could quite easily just stick with one year group and do all of your lectures with them. Obviously on Erasmus you're in a bit of a limbo between 2nd and 3rd year, so you have to pick which one to go into. I started off going to 3rd year modules because I thought it would prepare me better for final year, but through a mix of the language barrier and the fact that they had covered some areas differently, I wasn't keeping up. So I swapped to second year modules instead. It was a lot easier, having a bit of a head start on what they were covering, but it was far from just a recap of our second year and I learnt a lot of new material, which I'm planning to use in third year, as well as consolidating the knowledge I already had.

If you're really struggling with the language barrier I recommend going for masters modules, which are mostly taught in English and some of which you might already know a bit about. In general the bachelor course provides a deep knowledge of central maths topics and then the students are given a chance to diversify in their masters. This means some of the modules are still introductions.

I did introduction to Combinatorics which I really recommend. The lecturer is an Italian guy and he took the class out for ice-cream after the final lecture! Another one of my favourite modules was the second year presentation project. You work in a group of 4 to do a piece of research which is eventually condensed into two large posters. Your group then spends a week presenting the topic at the university's science fair. It was a great chance to speak lots of French and get to know the people in my class better.

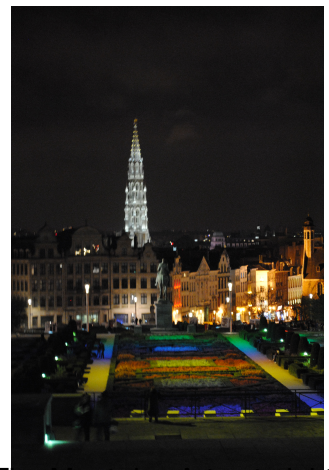
Travel

Within Brussels there is an excellent public transport system and as a student you can get a huge discount. It's only €125 for the year if you take in the little slip of paper that the university gives you in your arrivals pack. There are buses, trams and a metro which are all interlinked and really frequent. There's also the Villo service which is much like the Boris Bikes in London. You pay € 32 for the year and then you can use any bike for up to half an hour for free.

Brussels is in the perfect location to visit lots of places in Europe. Germany, France, Holland and Luxembourg are only a few hours away by the train, which is both cheap and efficient (if you discount the time there was a tree on the line and it took me 8 hours and 5 trains to get back from Luxembourg).

There is also an excellent scheme in Belgium called the Go Pass which is €50 for 10 journeys between any two stations in Belgium. This makes it cheap to visit places like Gent, Bruges and Antwerp.

Getting to Brussels from England is incredibly quick and easy with the Eurostar. Also by using this you avoid any annoying luggage restrictions on weight or contents.



The Mont des Arts at night

Social Life

There are so many things to see and do in Brussels let alone the whole of Belgium. Some recommendations I have are:

- Eating the Chips at Frites Flagey - I once queued for an hour and a half and it was still worth it
- Having a waffle from the place next to the Manekin Pis
- Trying one of the 2000 beers in Delirium (not the chocolate one though - it's disgusting)
- Going on a cycling tour of the city
- Walking through the Mont Des Arts at night when it's lit up
- Visiting museums on the first Wednesday afternoon of the month when the majority of them are free
- The Christmas market (hard to miss as it takes over the centre for a month)

- The free concerts that take place in the parks over the summer



The Carnival de Binche where they throw oranges at the crowd

During the summer there are lots of free music concerts around Brussels where you can hear artists from all round the world.



Why I would recommend doing Erasmus

Doing an Erasmus year is one of the best decisions I've ever made. Not only did I improve my French and make some amazing friends from around the world, I learnt a lot more about myself. I already thought I was an independent person, but some aspects of Erasmus were really difficult, especially at the beginning. The hardest part was being completely alone, with no one to give you advice or tell you how things worked. However, I learnt a lot more by working it out for myself and because I was alone I made some really incredible close friends who I could rely on for anything.

I spent a lot of time having no idea what was going on, but in the end I actually enjoyed having no clue what would happen next. It certainly prepared me for my trip to India where hardly anything went to plan! Although sometimes it was hard, I came away from this year feeling like I could deal with anything.

Another part of Erasmus is the cultural exchange, not only with my host country but also with all the other Erasmus students who were there at the same time. You will be surprised by both what you have in common and what is different. You learn to be more open minded about what is 'normal' and you get the opportunity to make the bits of other cultures you like, a part of your own traditions.

Doing Erasmus will change the way you look at yourself and the rest of the world. I had an amazing Erasmus experience, it was so much fun. I completely recommend that anyone considering an Erasmus year goes for it. You will have the time of your life!

You are very welcome to contact me any time either before or after you go if you have any questions: e.jordan@warwick.ac.uk