

Erasmus Experience Report

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What can be the main motivation to do a semester abroad in France?

From the beginning, it was my plan to study in France to accomplish my double degree program at the University of Clermont Auvergne (UCA) located in Clermont-Ferrand. Even though I went to France with no basic knowledge of the French language, I can proudly say I could get a certain degree of proficiency in the French language. Moreover, the university has a special entity for French courses, and also, the faculty of development economics provides two classes both in elementary and intermediate classes as the non-credit courses. Thus, I strongly recommend UCA to anyone who wants to learn or improve French language skills.

How to get from Göttingen to Clermont-Ferrand?

There are several ways to reach from Göttingen to Clermont-Ferrand. Certainly, the easiest one is with a flight (1-2 hours), either from Hannover airport to Lyon or Clermont-Ferrand airport. Although it is the easiest and fastest commuting way, the direct flight usually costs around 200-300 euros if you want to buy on short notice. I would recommend buying beforehand to lower the cost by around 100-150 euros. But you also need to commute from Lyon to Clermont-Ferrand (Flixbus is more suggested on this route, and costs between 20-40 euro depending on the season and time for departure.) or take a taxi from Clermont airport to the city center which would cost 15-20 euros. My first experience was with a train, and it was supposed to be 12 hours; nevertheless, my train got delayed by the German railway company, so I missed the last train from Lyon to Clermont-Ferrand. Thus, the French railway company reimbursed me by providing a hotel and a new ticket for the early morning. However, it also got delayed due to the maintenance process, so I was late for orientation by 1 hour. Thus, I would recommend traveling at least two days before welcome days, and taking early trains if you prefer this communication method. Also, the usual price is 100-120 euro, and you can either go to Baden-Baden then Lyon or another route is to go Frankfurt and Paris then Clermont Ferrand; however, during huge demand, tickets could cost more than 200 euro. In addition, another way is to use the Flix bus which is quite cheaper and reliable but lasts longer (19 hours). The usual ticket costs 50 euro if you buy it earlier or 100 euro on short notice. Thus, going to Clermont-Ferrand could be a bit challenging and costly; thus, earlier scheduling for the trip is more than welcomed.

Social environment

ESN (Erasmus Student Network) is quite active and organizes many parties and social gatherings. For instance, every Tuesday, Cafe des Langues where students got to know each

other and many quiz games were held. Also, there were many discounts if you had an ESN card (Flix bus, bars, and Ryanair), and you just needed to give 10 euros to get it. Also, in the development economics faculty, there were many English-speaking students, and I was surprised that many German students from different places came to Clermont. For example, I met 5 German students from Glodop, the Erasmus network, and the university itself. So, you can technically feel at home by knowing people from different countries too. Also, many young people could speak English besides Erasmus students, so you can still know local students by not speaking enough French. Moreover, French people are quite open-minded to know people from different countries, so you will not feel isolated from others due to the language barrier. Furthermore, just near the dormitory of Saint Jacques Delot Crous, there is a sports facility for students, so you can take many free classes in self-defense, boxing, or transport. Thus, it is also a good spot to be socialized with others. Also, many French students do parties on Thursday unlike Germans on Friday, and many bars such as Carmela, Keystone, The British Book Club, Hacienda, The still Irish Pub, and Charlotte bar are good places to spend weekends. Also, when I first came, there was a short cinema festival that is famous after the Cannes movie festival. Moreover, there are always many musical concerts in which you can get info on posters on dormitory walls or in the streets.

Accommodation

Based on my experience, I can advise Crous dormitories, especially Saint-Jacques Delot which is a huge student dorm network in France. Many international and local students are relocated to these dormitories, and our international coordinator helped us to get a spot in this dorm. This dorm usually offers 9 square meters of rooms with a shared kitchen where you can meet your neighbors. Many buildings are renovated, and the dormitory has a small place that offers medical services, and qualified doctors and nurses operate there. Also, there are small facilities for doing sport, and reception operates 7/24. It is also quite safe to go outside whenever you want for small walking. Moreover, it has a big Crous Restaurant in which you can get cheap lunch and dinner for 3.30 euro. It is quite close to the university, especially the economics department in which the classes for development economics are taking place (only 13 minutes from the dormitory by walking). In addition, you can easily get to the city center by tram which is just next to the backdoor of the dormitory, so you can commute to the city center in 5-10 minutes conveniently. In addition, there are free bicycles in the front of the dormitory, you just need to use them with a few steps by using the app. In addition, you can purchase a tram ticket for just 4.90 per month, and also there is an info center just next to my dorm where you can get info about everything regarding your stay, transportation costs, and so on. Also, many activities happen in dormitories such as cinema shows, and different activities (such as French dinners) within dormitories organized by ESN. The price of accommodation is around 250 and CAF (French Social Services) provides a 40% refund for rent; thus, even it gets cheaper. Some people prefer private houses due to the subsidies provided by the government, so it is also an option to get good accommodation for a relatively cheaper price with the help of CAF. Nevertheless, be mindful that CAF can be very slow, and in-person meetings could facilitate the process; however, you need to book an appointment a few weeks before. Moreover, you need to translate your birth certificate in

France if your birth certificate is not given within the EU. In addition, you can apply to CAF if you are a citizen of an EU country or you hold a valid residence permit or visa within France. But if you have a residence permit from a different EU country as an international student, you need to get a visa or residence permit within France to be eligible for CAF help. It is better to get a visa or new residence permit to proceed with the CAF application, and it is recommended to start CAF procedure asap.

Studies

All lectures in development economics faculty were in English, so at least a B2 level of English is needed to comprehend the course material. As a double degree student, I had a very rigid course list system, so I had 30 credits of workload, and some of them were really demanding. Nevertheless, for Erasmus students, it is much more flexible, and the minimum requirement of credits is much less. Also, French education relies on a joint grading scheme in which the weighted average must be higher than 10 out of 20 for validation of the semester. Also, it is quite detrimental to take notes while professors explain classes because that information could appear on exams. In the first two months, we had just a few classes around 5 subjects even though we had a very long holiday which was about 3 weeks in April, so May and June became very intensive because 7 classes started two weeks earlier than the exam dates even some started just 4 days before the exam. Hence, that kind of not well-organized system can create some wrong incentives, so you can fall behind in classes. So, it was better to focus on classes that started earlier, and these classes are usually the hardest ones. For example, two classes Development Microeconomics and Sustainable Development were harder than compared to the remaining 11 classes, and the credit and weight in the grading system was larger (3 credits per each). Especially, Development Microeconomics had many tutorials and chapters, and a certain degree of algebra was needed to pass it. Thus, it was necessary to be consistent with course materials, and the professor did not provide correct answers to tutorials, so it was essential to solve as many exercises before tutorials because in tutorials, the Ph.D. candidate students tried to solve many exercises as she could but 90 minutes were not enough to solve all questions, so you were supposed to choose certain question numbers and ask her. However, communication with the professor and tutor was not organized, so we had many doubts about the accuracy of our answers, and further examination of some questions was carried out with the professor. In addition, you will be definitely exposed to different educational systems and you may have some struggles to follow classes due to professors' strong accents in English and the class structure they were making. Namely, classes are structured to cover as many points without giving proper explanation which is quite opposed to the German system. So, you may have some difficulties if you did not read the course materials beforehand. In addition, I went to a semester abroad in the hardest semester of development economics in France, and also I had 2-3 months of semester in Germany, so I could not finish my semester properly here. Hence, I completed two of my classes at a German university in France. So, it is a trade-off you must keep in mind. That French semester comprised 13 classes and a very tight schedule in which we did not have a reading period. So, we had up to 8 exams on 4 days (sometimes 3 exams on a single day). However, exams were quite easier than I expected and I did really well even

though I prepared all exams in a shorter period. Moreover, after the exam period, we had project deadlines, usually assessed as group work. Even though I achieved the second-highest grade in the French system, I could not attain the highest average due to some difficulties in group matching. Unlike the German system, all group matching is up to students, either you are making verbal confirmation with colleagues or professors are giving topic lists you could choose and match with others without getting permission from anyone else. Also, in many projects, you could make big groups like with 3 or 4 people; nevertheless, it is quite necessary to form groups as soon as projects are announced. Since you will have fewer group members, if something, such as health problems happens to your group members, you will have even more burden of work. Also, the remaining students may not be a good match to your knowledge, and the free rider problem could occur. Thus, my suggestion is to incoming students that you should be very fast in finding the proper group or you will have some struggles or you will have some grades which will disappoint you at the end of the semester (as happened to me on 2-3 occasions). Especially, if you are studying with locals and a big group of students such as GLODEP who know each other better and are willing to work with people they may know beforehand. Many subjects had only one assignment or exam to get a grade; nevertheless, you may be required to do certain non-graded assignments as a requirement in the class, and some professors may prefer to have several assignments and exams for overall grading. In addition, almost all classes are taught in person but you can always ask a professor to have online meetings if you have health problems. In addition, you will have a chance to be taught by different professors from all over the world. Because many professors came for a few weeks just exclusively to teach you, it was one of the reasons to have such a tight schedule. However, I can confidently say that my teamwork skills significantly improved, and I could work better under pressure. Moreover, you have a chance of taking exams if your grade is very low or it does not add up to 10, so you have a second chance 1 month later with 15-minute oral exams. Also, the French system has a compensating grading system in which even if you fail, you can still validate courses with the overall grade of that block (comprised of several subjects) or with the help of other blocks. But if you do two semesters, you can validate with the grade of another semester too. Moreover, many professors had more interactive approaches and personal attitudes toward students, so you never felt that you have some kind of social hierarchy. In addition, our faculty organized many trips to regions, Paris, exhibition museums, and hills, so you can be relaxed after having an intensive schedule. My advice for new students could be to choose group partners faster and wiser and also be consistent with course materials during the semester, so you may still enjoy what Clermont offers you and be happy with your academic performance. Also, one may say the German system is so flexible that you can be a bit undisciplined not to study classes and drop them one day before the exam. However, having a bit rigid system makes you study even though you may not prioritize studies at that time. Moreover, one should be not afraid of having such an exam schedule since many exam questions are coming in general; nevertheless, using specific inputs from course materials could be an extra bonus for getting a good grade. Also, the grading scheme for conversion grades from the French to German system in our university could be a bit different but I cannot say it is significantly worse than other universities. They transform every course separately, and based on the credit numbers of particular courses, your overall grade appears. If you get 18, it is 1 in the German

system. If you are between 16 and 17 (including both), it is 1.3. Between 15 and 16 (excluding) is 1.7. It is similar in that way, and the lowest grade is between 10 and 11 (excluding) and is converted to 4.

City/ Student Life

The city is surrounded by many mountains and green areas. We always liked spending time in Jardin Lecoq which was next to the law faculty, and 3 minutes from my dormitory with the tram. From Parc Montjuzet, you could see the whole view of the city, and it is much bigger than Jardin but you need to commute 30-40 minutes to get there. Moreover, Clermont-Ferrand has a really rich history and unique churches such as Basilique Notre-Dame-du-Port, Church of Saint Joseph, and notable Cathedrale Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption. Especially, Cathedrale was built with black volcanic rocks, and its unique Gothic style gives a very different vibe. Also, you are not supposed to pay any fee to go inside. Furthermore, around this church, there is a nice square with a water fountain in the middle, and many bars you can go to evenings and hang out with friends. In addition, you can go to many national museums and museums of Michelin companies which have headquarters in the city. Moreover, hiking is one of the recommended activities in Clermont-Ferrand since many volcanoes form a chain of mountains around the city, and Puy de Dome is the most famous one among them. In addition, you can go to Vulcania amusement park where you can learn a lot regarding tectonic movements and volcanoes. Moreover, there are many peculiar villages and castles in the Auvergne region, so it could be a good destination to visit. Also, the city is well-connected to the railway system, so you can visit some interesting cities such as Vichy in which mineral waters form an image of the city, and you can try water there. It is just 30 minutes away from Clermont by train. In addition, Lyon is extremely close to Clermont, and the commuting distance is roughly 2 hours by bus and train but the bus is a bit slower (max 30 minutes) with considerably cheaper price. You can find many places, and 2-3 days might not be enough to explore the city. In addition, you can make it easier to go to Montpellier, Marseille, and Paris with a commuting distance of 4 hours by train. However, good planning is needed to travel within student budget since trains can cost a lot like in Germany. Additionally, you can go to watch Rugby and Football matches of local teams, such as ASM Clermont Auvergne and Clermont Foot. I went to watch football match for just only 10 euro which is student price. In addition, there are multiple restaurants and shopping place in Jaude where you can spend nice time and find whatever is needed to purchase. In addition, Auchan grocery markets provides discount card for students, and after certain amount purchase, you are getting 10% bonus and use for subsequent shopping. However, labor strikes can disrupt many activities including canteen services, public transportation, and train systems across cities. You will experience it on many occasions. You just need to download French public transportation apps to be aware of them. Many students buy their meals especially lunch from French Mensa, and there are many choices; nevertheless, for vegans and vegetarians, food choices can be quite limited. Mensa is open between 11:30 and 2 pm and 6:00-8:00 pm, so you can get cheap and relatively decent food for 3.30 euro, and French canteen applies 6 points system and they are assigning points for each food, so excess points means roughly 50 cents more. However, if

you want to have a healthy menu, you need to avoid cheese and desserts because French people consume them in almost every meal. As mentioned earlier, “grève”, a labor strike will be very familiar to you after spending so much time in France because it happened more than 5 times; nevertheless, during my stay, never protests converted into violent action. Thus, I would say Clermont-Ferrand is quite a safe city. Nevertheless, it is better to be cautious when you are going out at night since some people may not act adequately. Also, except for our university, the UCA, some universities also joined to strike, so disruption in lessons happened; however, luckily, my university always operated during labor strikes.

Communication

All over university buildings and dormitories, I could use local university network which was called Global or I could use eduroam by using university email from either French and German universities, so I did not complain about regarding internet connection. I used Alditalk as the primary mobile number and I had quite good roaming tariffs. But for dealing with CAF and social security services, it is better to purchase French number. Moreover, we had great communication with university staff, they were responding asap, and it was easier to have appointment with professors. They had really nice attitude and great efficiency in dealing students' concerns. It should be noted that although many people could speak English, there are considerable number of people who do not speak English or prefer French, especially in administrative stuff or official agencies.

Finances and costs

Above all, France is quite expensive compared to Germany, especially the prices of grocery goods. In addition, it is quite hard to find private accommodation, so it is recommended to get place in Crous dormitories. Nevertheless, you can still get some funds from the government, and Caisse d'Allocation Familiale (CAF) is responsible for deciding eligibility and the amount of fund for housing allowance. In Clermont-Ferrand, it is located just next to train station. However, as I mentioned before, you cannot get CAF subsidy if you are coming with German residence permit unless you are citizen of Germany since they required international students (Non-Eu) to obtain French residence permit or visa to be eligible. For housing costs 250, the CAF amount ranged between 80-90, so it can be said that it is quite generous despite of bureaucracy. Also, they are taking account of application date to reimburse partial rent, so it is better to start procedure. In our case, they explained and helped us to get insurance and apply for CAF. In my case, I did not get any insurance in France since I was insured in Germany, and it was not mandatory to be insured in France again. Also, you need a French bank account to get money from CAF, so I opened my bank account in Credit Agricole, and our program coordinator helped to get bank appointment. Also, it is easier to send money to Izly account (university student card) to make payment of printing papers, do laundry, and paying mensa meals. They just require ID, is a certificate of accommodation (you need ask to Crous administration to get it), and possibly some minor documents such as student id or document for verification of university enrolment. Easiest and costless way of transferring money from German Bank account to French one is to use Revolut as the intermediary

among bank systems of two different countries. In addition, in order to ease procedure, you need to get few passport photos or you can take pictures in photo machines in Auchan close Saint-Jacques Delot. For CAF, you will need to have enrollement letter for university or student id, birth certificate (so, it is better to have at least scanned pdf of it), insurance card, and your housing contracts. Good side is that you do not need to carry lots of cash in France, almost all places accept credit card payment unlike Germany. Moreover, you can apply for food meal discount (1 euro per meal) in Crous restaurants if you think your finances are not enough. However, I was rejected due to getting Erasmus scholarship from EU.

Further tips

- Although kitchen are common, there is not any tableware (crockery) to use, so it is better to take some plates and cutlery. Or you can go to 1 euro shopping place in city center.
- You can ask for blankets, sheets and pillows from Crous administration, and they are charging you 15 euro but it is quite good for such small beds. But you are just renting, and you need to wash and put them in room before moving out. However, pillows and blankets are good for allergice people because they are not made by feather or wool.
- Also, you need to send 1 month rent to Crous administration as deposit to secure your place, and it usually takes time to get it back.
- With student id, you can pay meals, laundry, and printers because they are incorporated into Izly account; however, you cannot send more than 150 euro to student card online. If you are willing to use izly account often, you can fill your balance in small machine next to reception. Sometimes, you can pay with usual bank debit card if you show your student id to cashiers.
- Be aware of that there could be some inadequate people could show unacceptable behaviour by making you insecure or using racist slurs. So, it is always necessary to contact your program coordinator if it happens in university. You can encounter these people even at nights outside of bars and clubs, so you can always ask to authorities in this regards. French officials are sensitive, especially in this regard.
- If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me: farid.isayev@stud.uni-goettingen.de.