

## **Study Report from Caen**

I have always wanted to live in France. When I found out that I could go on an Erasmus exchange the last year of my bachelor, I immediately decided to apply. I'm studying biology at NMBU, and I'm heading in a more biochemical direction. NMBU has a partnership with the university in Caen, which lies in the north of France. During my stay there I only had courses related to biology, biochemistry and microbiology.

My stay in France began in August 2016 when I took a three-week intensive preparation course at the university in Caen, arranged by the Norwegian language institute for Norwegian students going to France to study. The course helped us refresh our grammatical and oral French skills, which became very helpful later.

Caen is a city with around 110 000 inhabitants, situated two hours northwest of Paris in the Normandy region, known by most people for its role during the second world war. The city was more or less bombed to the ground during the war which is why most of the architecture there today is modern, and to be honest a bit ugly. But the huge old castle in the city center, the endless amount of restored, gothic churches combined with the amazing pink-orange-purple colored sunsets that repeatedly cover the city compensate for all that was bombed.

Caen lies in the department of Calvados, which is also the name of a world famous alcoholic spirit made from fermented apples. It is the only region in France that doesn't have any significant wine production because of too low average annual temperatures. Instead of having grapes they have tons of apples (Normandy is known as the apple region), so the region is famous for its cider production, as well as being home of the known cheese Camembert. I already miss the food in France and the huge weekly markets with cheap fresh fruits, vegetables, cheese and oriental, spicy street food. And the cliché is true – French people actually carry their baguettes under the arm publicly.

In September, the real courses started at the university. I went to every lecture with high spirits, filled with curiosity, always sitting at the front row eager to learn something; be it biology related or just by expanding my French vocabulary when listening to the professors. There were several new, small things I had to get used to though, regarding the school system in France. The summer there lasted very long that year; the temperatures were above 30 degrees Celsius each day, and none of the auditoriums in the university were equipped with air-condition. I felt like suffocating several times, and I was surprised nobody seemed to mind opening the windows. I blamed my northern lungs who are spoiled with Norwegian cold weather and always having plenty of oxygen around. I eventually got more used to the heavy aired auditoriums.

Something which also made things worse is, that even if they are supposed to, I'd say 95% of the teachers don't use the 15-minute break which is normally between each hour of lectures. They talk for 120 minutes straight, and sometimes just asking to go to the bathroom is considered rude. The school system in France is known for being outdated, old-fashioned and extremely bureaucratic. They prefer piles of paper instead of using the internet as a platform. You get the impression that it's all a bit messy, there is lack of control in the administration. Teachers don't submit their PowerPoints online to the students, which means you have to beg your classmates for their notes if you missed class. If you ask the teacher a question, you feel more like a nuisance to them than someone they would be glad to help. Some of the teachers didn't even acknowledge the fact that I'm not a native French speaker, and expected me to be at the same level as my classmates when it came to communicating and understanding. I just closed my eyes and jumped into it, even if it made me feel stupid at times.

I was the only foreigner in my class. The other students all knew each other from before, and that combined with my somehow shy nature left me quite an outsider for several months. Around Christmas I had made three or four friends, all girls with whom I had worked together with in the laboratory class.

I need to emphasize that everything about the university was not just negative, that wouldn't be fair to say. Despite all the difficulties and new things I had to adapt to, I must praise most French students for being very hard working and serious when it comes to their ambitions, at least those who were in my class. The level of knowledge was very high, the subjects taught were very heavy and the curriculum huge. Many of my classmates were expressing a fury towards the administration of the university and how they felt locked in the entire system, not being heard nor respected as students. That made me feel less alone in my views, and more reassured for not being the only one questioning the French system.

Academically, what has given me the most during this year, is definitely laboratory training. Each course is divided in three: CM (Cours Magistral = main lectures with professors), TD (Travaux Dirigés = optional classes where the class is divided into smaller groups. The subject is taught more in depth and its more accepted to ask questions) and TP (Travaux Pratique = lab work). I had around 12 hours of laboratory classes each week, in different subjects. I enjoyed that very much – here I was forced to speak French, I understood better what we were learning, I got to know several good people – both students and teachers - and I felt more accepted and recognized as a fellow student.

The number of international students in Caen is pretty high. I was in other words never completely left alone. I knew many other Norwegians and I also made friends with a lot of people from all over the world. With confidence and certainty, I can also add that I met the man of my life there, which is why I never will regret going abroad, even if things there could be difficult at times. But that's life, no? I have learned a lot, my French has become fluent, and it feels good having eventually realized my childhood dream of living in France.

Some pictures from my stay:



The famous little island Mont Saint Michel lies in Brittany, which is the neighbor region of Normandy.  
A must see!



Étretat is famous for its shaped cliffs. Étretat is not far from Le Havre, which is the ugliest city I have ever seen in France! (It actually won an award for being the ugliest city in France)



The annual student carnival in March in Caen is the biggest student carnival in Europe – I chose to dress as a mermaid. Amazing day; great weather and so many funny costumes!



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They love festivals and arranging events in France. In this picture I went to an event where all cultural minorities in Caen gathered in a park, each country represented in a tent selling their delicious, native foods. There was a show on the stage with traditional singing, folk dance from African and Asian countries and martial arts.



The Norwegian students in Caen decided to make an event at the national day of Norway, the 17<sup>th</sup> of May. It was like being in Norway! Lots of delicious food, speeches and music



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With the man who is now my boyfriend, best friend and soulmate whom I was so incredibly lucky to meet in France during my stay. He comes from Indonesia and is taking his entire degree in Caen, so I will definitely go back there again!