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# ERASMUS EXPERIENCE REPORT

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## PREPARATION

As an Australian, when choosing the EUREC European Masters of Renewable Energy I was very interested in the cross-cultural experiences that were encouraged within the program. With the possibility to do two or three of the semesters in different countries, I knew I would gain a better understanding of Europe as a whole of varied parts than if I just studied in one country.

My placement at the University of Perpignan was confirmed a couple of months into the first semester at the University of Oldenburg, after having had a chance to consider the specialisation topics offered there and at the other partner universities. I decided to study in France based on the strength of their pioneering research in the field of solar thermal technology, despite knowing the field is less industrially developed than other renewable energies. I also had an idea that it would be very interesting to compare and contrast the French and German approaches to renewable energy policy, studying, and life.



Already before arriving, the culture shock began as we received little specific information about our upcoming semester compared to what we had received when being welcomed to Oldenburg! An informal meeting with a student who had previously taken this semester was very helpful, and confirmed some of my expectations. He also helped direct us to resources for finding accommodation in the Pyrenees village of Font Romeu, which would be a ski town when we arrived in mid-February.

## TRAVEL & ARRIVAL

I had two weeks between my last exam in Germany and first class in France. I sold some larger belongings, sent others in a couple of parcels through the post, and carried the rest in two backpacks. Rather than flying, I wanted to travel overland and booked a series of trains over a few days, stopping to visit a friend in Zürich and see the cities of Lyon and Perpignan.



The culture shock really hit suddenly on the train out of Switzerland! Different language, foods and public attitudes rattled my slowly-acquired self-confidence from living in Germany over the previous semester. Arriving in Font Romeu, where the main laboratory was and all our classes, was quite exciting – with a lot of snow (novel to an Australian), and more blue skies and mountains than Oldenburg could dream of!

A few of my future classmates threw a small house party the night before our first class, where we were welcomed by our course coordinator who seemed much friendlier in person than we had expected from the brief emails.

## ACCOMMODATION

Being a ski town for the first couple of months of the semester, finding accommodation was a little tricky as most places were only available for high prices on a daily or weekly basis. A list of long-term accommodation options was obtained from a local real estate agent before we arrived, and many classmates found a place to stay together this way. A colleague and I found an apartment in the same building as the others, but it wasn't available for the first couple of weeks. The university lab often hosts visiting researchers, and was kind enough to allow use of their guesthouse in the interim. It was simple but peaceful and very close by! The guesthouse provided us with adventures of walking through the snow to diagnose occasional power and heating outages, and one occasion where the water pipes froze and we resorted to melting snow to make tea!

Once the ski season finished, the village was much quieter and we could move in to the same building as several of the other students. It felt like holiday accommodation, with a nice view of the mountains and fully furnished but with no real desks to study at. As students of renewable energy we noted the electric (not gas) stove and heating, and the lesser thermal insulation compared to Germany. It was closer to the centre of the small village but only a 15 minute walk to class – downhill in the morning and up in the afternoon! Fortunately my classmate spoke French, which was very useful when navigating the French requirements for rental payments, electricity bills and insurance. I had devoted the last year only to learning German.

## STUDYING AT THE UNIVERSITY

With this specialisation semester in solar thermal technology, we studied at the PROMES laboratory in the Pyrenees rather than at the main campus in coastal Perpignan. As such we mostly saw researchers and the only students were our direct classmates (a group of 12). With such a small class the teaching style was flexible, often all together in the one room. Professors would come on a sporadic schedule rather than a weekly routine, which was occasionally difficult to plan for but felt very personal.



Most classes were lectures, with several computer labs and a couple of thermal experiments and two field trips. The computer courses were interesting and useful, although the thermal labs did not delve as deeply as I would have liked. The field trips also came very late in the semester. Some of the professors are renowned for their experience, and gladly answered our questions on the few occasions we saw them.

In the end, the assessment criteria were quite opaque compared to the experience in Germany, and the results awarded confusingly used course labels that we did not use during the semester. They also adhered to the French academic tradition of rarely awarding marks above 16/20. Some subjects in particular, though, definitely strengthened our abilities through good explanations and tutoring. I felt like the opportunity to foster industry connections was not fully taken advantage of, however.



## EVERYDAY LIFE & LEISURE TIME

By contrast with the very intense core semester in Oldenburg, I had a little more free time in France! Even after using the time to comfortably review the course material, there was time for enjoying the mountains. As a mountain village, the attractions are natural rather than cosmopolitan, but I enjoyed that. I even relished hiking through the snow to the supermarket for groceries.

The laboratory building itself gave us a simple students' room with couches where we gathered before class. Lunchtime was a very French affair, with the whole building gathering in the staff restaurant where we ate a three-course meal together. After eating, the top floor of the laboratory was popular for playing table tennis or table football in the remaining time of our two-hour break.

The highlights of my leisure time were a group ski day (with many students skiing for the first time), a canyoning trip with hot pools on a cold day, and a couple of springtime hikes once the snow had melted enough (including one where we walked to a Spanish enclave for lunch). Our course coordinator even took the class to a water park after the last exam!

## CONCLUSION

Overall, I enjoyed the semester. I think I had my expectations set appropriately. Some of my preconceptions were disproved and others confirmed. There were some pleasant surprises and some unexpected challenges. I would encourage students following this path to be self-motivated and ask insightful questions of the lecturers. I would also tell them to be prepared for trying many new types of cheese, and mountain activities!