

# *Erasmus + Exchange* **to Lille**

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## **“Is the page still damp from my tears? I’m sure we must be due to land quite soon....”**

So read the opening lines from the diary I kept during my séjour in Lille, which belie the illuminating and utterly formative few months I spent there as a medical externe.

I cut a lonely figure to anyone who cared to look, anxiously poring over Google Maps and tripping over my suitcases as I emerged from my train at Gare Lille Flandres, and took my first gulp of crisp, continental air. I gazed at a swarm of nattily-clad businessmen striding towards the metro shouting at each other in rapid French, and wondered how I could possibly survive, overwhelmed and alone in this foreign city; and yet, three months later, I was asking myself how I could possibly leave it all behind.

As a third-year medical student in UCC, I was lucky enough to be afforded the opportunity to complete the clinical placements of my second semester in France, as part of the Erasmus+ programme. Given the choice between Lille and Nantes, I tentatively requested Lille because of its reputation for boasting one of the largest and most important health campuses in Northern Europe, which consistently ranks in France’s top three hospitals each year.

A sprawling complex of ten hospitals, the CHU de Lille is unlike anything you could ever imagine. Instead of wards dedicated to certain specialities, entire hospitals are devoted to separate fields, allowing for the delivery of state-of-the-art, specialised, holistic patient care. As part of my ‘stage,’ I spent five weeks in ‘Hépatogastro’ (GI department), and four in ‘Urgences’ (A&E), beginning the first week of January. I remember walking in the shadow of that looming red-brick tower, ‘Hôpital Huriez,’ every morning and evening in the early days, feeling utterly alone in the foreign city in which I was stranded. Overwhelmed and intimidated by the white coats and unintelligible conversations around the patients’ bedsides on rounds, the health system couldn’t have felt more different to what I had thus far experienced on placement in Cork. ‘Hôpital Huriez’ was like something straight from the set of ‘Grey’s Anatomy;’ everything was exotic, from the white coats to the eloquent politeness of doctors which is so inherent in the French language, to the passionate disputes over the care of a patient during early-morning MDT meetings.

Hierarchy and respect are paramount in French hospitals, though the structure is slightly different to the Irish system. Medical students spend six years in university, working as ‘externes’ for the final three years on various clinical rotations, for which they are paid. They are quite autonomous, admitting and discharging their own patients and assuming total responsibility for their hospital care. Interestingly, they must also spend a summer working in a nurse’s role, which I think could be a very formative addition to our medical curriculum here. They took me on as their protégée and



# Elective Experience



would check I understood the pathology relating to each patient on rounds, interpret scans and ECGs with me and take me out in the evenings to go rock climbing, which young people in Lille were crazy about!! Once qualified, they work as interns until they become 'chefs' (consultants)- there is no in-between.

I was amazed to note how relaxed the dress code seemed to be compared to Irish hospitals. The chefs were often seen in jeans and funky, scruffy runners, while nurses wore the most ostentatious earrings and dazzling hairbands. Their casual dress did not reflect their approach to patient care, however; in Gastro, every day patients successfully underwent liver transplants and in Urgences, were stitched and bandaged and referred with minimal wait times. I got to take histories and exams and present to the interns, care for my own patients, and help with ascitic taps and suturing; I remember trembling as I called the bacteriology department, my first day, to ask for a patient's lab results, desperately trying to decipher the rapid French crackling down the phone from a man who didn't realise I was newly arrived in France! I hadn't studied the language since my Leaving Cert, but total immersion is the best way to learn, and by my second placement I no longer needed to rely on my safety net, "Je comprends pas."

Lille may boast a world-renowned health campus, but the vibrant, dynamic city had much more than that to offer the medical externe released from duty. The romantic 'Vieux Lille,' the antique secluded part of the city, was my favourite haunt. Coffee and writing, with a freshly-procured pastry in a cosy French café, was my sanctuary at times when the hospital work was demanding; on moonlit walks around the 'Grand Place,' the main square, we were serenaded by a jauntily-clad jazz musician, and possibilities seemed endless. Sundays were for early-morning promenades to the market in Wazemmes, for earthy, locally-harvested fruit and vegetables. My first time, I almost ended up going hungry for the week, as I spent all the money I'd withdrawn for the market in the clothes stalls; a rookie mistake!



What I loved most about the French was their work-life balance; when asked the question, 'What do you do?' they replied with their hobbies and passions, while in Ireland, the standard answer is 'teacher,' or 'engineer.' They will emerge from a boulangerie and bite the 'quignon,' the heel of the baguette, as a ritual on their way home. The mode de vie of France is incomparable to that of any other country. I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be.

## Glossary

**Séjour-** sojourn

**Gare Lille Flandres-** the train station

**CHU de Lille-** the hospital campus in Lille

**Hôpital Huriez-** a particular hospital within the campus

**Externe-** a term describing 4-6th year medical students in France

**Je comprends pas-** I don't understand

**Vieux Lille-** the old part of the city

**Boulangerie-** bakery

**Mode de vie-** way of life

