Practical Advice

Visa

With the help of CALS Exchange the visa process is not too difficult. I have two pieces of advice: LISTEN and ORGANIZE. If you listen to what the CALS Exchange office tells you, and if you keep yourself organized, you won’t have any problems. CALS Exchange will tell you everything you need to know and walk you through the whole process. In the end I believe it cost me $65 to obtain the visa, which is paid at the consulate when you pick it up. Also, be warned, you need to go to the consulate twice – one time to hand in your application materials, and one time to pick up your passport. Make sure you take that into account when planning which consulate you want to visit, and when scheduling your first meeting. It takes a few weeks to process your application, and you want to make sure your visa is granted and you can pick up your passport before you depart! I picked mine up the day before I left, and could have done without that stress!

Packing

Because of the nature of this program it involves a ton of moving around, and sometimes requires you to be prepared with the bare minimum you need to live already in your suitcase. There are a few things I brought which I was VERY glad I did:

- **Only one suitcase.** I know this seems very difficult, especially if you need to be prepared for all types of weather in several seasons. But it is most definitely possible, and it’s probably the single best decision I made when packing. For three weeks in the summer I traveled in Italy, Hungary and Switzerland to visit wineries and vineyards, and we stayed in a new hotel, hostel or lodge almost every night. Sometimes the bus couldn’t reach where we were staying... meaning we walked. When I was lugging my things up a mountain in Switzerland I was most definitely glad I only had one suitcase! Seriously, don’t over pack. Check out www.onebag.com for help.

- **A PakTowl.** At homestays I was always offered a real towel, which was very generous. However, when I wasn’t in someone’s home, it was my responsibility to have a towel. It’s difficult because they can be kind of bulky, and tough to fit in a suitcase. It’s even more awkward if you only need it a few weeks out of your stay, but during those weeks you definitely need it! Before departing I bought a PakTowl at EMS, which is a travel towel made of synthetic material. It is fairly small, so it doesn’t take up very much room, and dries quickly, which is good for someone who moves around a lot! I was definitely glad to have it.

- **Earplugs/facemask.** Two things I couldn’t have survived without. With a facemask and earplugs, it’s possible to sleep anywhere, no matter what everyone else around you is doing. Since my trip involved a lot of moving around and sometimes sleeping in some very strange situations, there were a few times I was absolutely dependent on these things to get sleep.

- **Small LED flashlight.** This is something I didn’t think about buying until after I left, but was definitely useful. Just like the facemask and earplugs, no matter where you are or what’s going on around you, you can always find your stuff, go through your stuff, find your way, blind an assailant (just kidding!), etc. if you have a small flashlight with you.

- **Suitcase locks.** I spent quite a bit of time in trains, and I was always glad my suitcase was completely locked up. That way, I could leave it in the luggage compartment and not worry about who could get into it and what they
might take. A few times I even wished I had some for my backpack, so I could walk around in crowded places without worrying someone might try to get into inside. You need to be paying attention to your things when you travel, because there are definitely people who can tell you’re traveling and that you don’t know what the heck you’re doing, and will try to take advantage of that (I’m talking to you, creepy man in the Barcelona airport who tried to sneak into my bag!).

- **Sleepsheet.** A sleepsheet is basically a makeshift sleeping bag made with a sheet by sewing it together. Just like the earplugs and facemask, this was essential in making sure I could sleep just about anywhere. Sheets are generally provided in dorms and hostels, but you never know who else has used them and for what, or when they were washed last. With a sleepsheet you don’t have to worry.

- **Shower flip-flops.** Shower anywhere without getting athletes foot! Dorms, hostels, you name it.

- **Synthetic underwear and laundry detergent.** While travelling in Italy, Hungary, and Switzerland in the summer I didn’t have access to a washing machine until about 12 days into the trip. With only seven pairs of underwear and spending all day in blazing heat, this could have been a huge problem! Luckily, I brought only synthetic underwear, which can easily be washed in a sink and dries very quickly. I also brought a small bottle of super concentrated laundry detergent I bought at EMS, which came in handy both when I needed to do laundry in the sink and when laundry detergent wasn’t supplied with the washing machine.

- **Layers.** This particular program allows you to experience the intense humidity and heat of summer in Toulouse, the damp fall weather in Angers, and the beginnings of winter as well. There is also some great weather, too! But you need to be prepared in case of the not-so-nice weather. Layers are a great way to do make sure you’re prepared for anything.

- **Some extra space!** You might want to take some stuff back home!

## Academics

Here is a very quick breakdown of my schedule during my time abroad:

**Weeks 1-2: Block 1, Summer Program**

**Academics:**
- **School:** El Purpan
- **Location:** Toulouse
- **Language:** English
- **Course subjects:** The European Union Agriculture in Europe, French courses for all levels
- **Evaluations:** Multiple-choice test at the end of the second week regarding agriculture in Europe
- **Other:** Weekend trip to Pyrenees Mountains, weekend trip to Barcelona

**Living:**
- **Housing:** Dormitory
- **Food:** Weekly stipends are given to pay for groceries, breakfast and dinner are not provided by the school, lunch is provided at the university restaurant.

## Arrival

Sometimes this program can seem a little confusing or overwhelming. So many places, so many people, so many schools to keep track of! But everywhere you go you can rest assured that you will be taken care of. Everywhere you go the host understands that you are new to the country and move around a lot, and they always make sure everything you will need is readily available. Upon arrival at Purpan in Toulouse a French student picked me up at the airport and took me to the dormitory. When I arrived there three other French students greeted me and gave me two bags of groceries, a metro/tram/bus pass preloaded for one month, sheets/blankets/pillow for my bed, all of the practical information I needed for finding the school and getting around Toulouse, and were there to answer any questions I had. They did this for every student in my program! They are totally aware of the fact that you just arrived in a foreign country, are likely in culture shock, and have no idea even where the nearest grocery store is. The administrators at Purpan even helped me book all of my plane tickets to get to and from the study tour before I left. In fact, there was not one time during my travel for six and a half months that someone wasn’t there at the airport/train station to pick me up and show me where to go, and they were always complete strangers. It can definitely seem overwhelming with all of the traveling, but there’s no need to worry, because everyone associated with FESIA does a fantastic job making sure your travels go as smoothly as possible.
Transportation: Bus, tram, metro, train

Weeks 3-5: Block 2, Study Tour

Academics:
- School: ESA Angers
- Location: Italy, Hungary, and Switzerland
- Language: French and English
- Course subjects: Tours of wineries and vineyards, grape growing and wine making process, tours of a nursery and research institute in Italy
- Evaluation: Multiple choice test at the end of week 5 regarding information learned during the visits
- Other: Weekend breaks in Rome, Italy, and Budapest, Hungary

Living:
- Housing: Hotels, hostels, and lodges
- Food: Breakfast and lunch were provided, dinner was not, but there was ample opportunity to buy groceries for dinner
- Transportation: Bus and train, provided by school

Week 6: OFII Appointment

Activity:
- One week off, and OFII appointment to validate visa
- School: El Purpan
- Location: Toulouse

Living:
- Housing: Dormitory
- Food: Not provided
- Transportation: Bus, tram, metro, train

Weeks 7-14: Block 3, Internship, part 1

Activity:
- Varies depending on the internship (for me, I worked in the winery, in the vineyard and did a research project on increasing exportation to the US)
- School: Internships are set up by El Purpan
- Location: Varies depending on the internship (for me, Mauleon d'Armagnac in Gers)

Living:
- Housing: Family stay (free)
- Food: Provided by family
- Transportation: Provided by family

Weeks 15-20: Block 4, Viticulture and Agroecology

Academics:
- School: ISARA Lyon
- Location: Lyon
- Language: English
- Course subjects: Sustainable viticulture, agroecology
- Evaluations: One group report and oral presentation, one individual report and presentation
- Other: Week long excursion to Luberon

Living:
- Housing: Family stay (400 € for 6 weeks)
- Food: Not provided (though I ate many times with my host)
- Transportation: Bus, tram, metro, train

Weeks 21-22: Block 3, Internship, part 2

Activity:
- Varies depending on the internship (for me, work in the winery and vineyard at the end of harvest)
- School: Internships are set up by El Purpan
- Location: Varies depending on the internship (for me, Gaillac)

Living:
- Housing: Family stay
- Food: Provided by family
- Transportation: Provided by family

Weeks 23-25: Block 5, Sustainable winemaking

Academics:
- School: ESA Angers
- Location: Angers
- Language: French
- Course subjects: Winemaking, short study trip in Alsace
- Evaluations: Exam and report (these were in English)
- Other: Week long excursion to Alsace

Living:
- Housing: Family stay (250 € for 3 weeks)
- Food: Breakfast and dinner provided, lunch able to be purchased at university restaurant
- Transportation: Tram, train

Weeks 26-27: Block 3, Internship, Part 3

Activity:
- Varies depending on the internship (for me, trimming vines for the winter)
School: Internships are set up by El Purpan
Location: Varies depending on the internship (For me, Gaillac)

Living:
Housing: Family stay
Food: Provided by family
Transportation: Provided by family

All the schoolwork is pre-determined before departure, so there is no need to worry about course enrollment or anything like that. You receive separate grades for each “block”, which will show up on your transcript but will not be included in your GPA. Additionally, the program is very new and still evolving, so it might not look exactly the same in the future.

Life Abroad

Language

I have never taken a formal class in the French language. So, before departing I spent about three hours per week for one semester trying to teach myself the basics. By the time I left I could say some simple phrases and knew some basic vocabulary, but was by no means ready to have a conversation. Although most of my coursework (not all) was in English, and I came across many French people who spoke English quite well, I can tell you that it is VERY difficult to be in a foreign country and not be able to speak the local language. By the time I returned to the States I had improved tremendously, and could hold my own in a conversation and get around without any problems. However, it was a long, painful process, and I still have a lot to learn. There are language courses offered at both Purpan and ISARA Lyon, which were somewhat helpful, but you will not have enough time in either course to learn as much as you need to know. If it is at all possible, I would definitely recommend taking French before the trip. If it’s not possible, I would at the VERY LEAST make a list of phrases you should be able to say (Hello, thank you, my name is ________, where is the train?, I need help, do you speak English?…) and keep it with you. Even if you can’t speak perfectly, people will really appreciate it if you at least try.

Banking

Personally, I decided not to open a French bank account during my time abroad. Before departure I did some research and discovered that the fees for using my credit card abroad were pretty minimal. The fees for using my debit card were more expensive, but the bank I use in the US has a sister bank in Europe, and I was able to withdraw cash from their ATMs with no charge. They have locations everywhere, so it wasn’t a problem to take out cash when I needed it. The only time I ran into trouble while using American credit cards was at automatic ticket machines in metro and train stations, and when buying train tickets online. For whatever reason, my credit and debit cards would just not work. However, as long as I went to buy my tickets in person, I had no problems.

Housing

All of the housing is pre-determined, so you don’t have to worry about finding a place to stay at any point in time. The fees for staying in the dormitory at Purpan, and for staying at hotels, hostels, and lodges during the study tour are worked into the tuition for each school. During the internship the family stay is free. At ISARA Lyon and ESA Angers I rented rooms from people associated with each school, which was arranged for me, and paid rent to them personally. Most of my housing was family stays, which I really enjoyed. I personally prefer to live with other people, and it was a really great way to make connections and learn more about the culture by observing many different families.

Transportation

There is ample transportation available in France. Public transportation in Toulouse (bus, tram, metro) costs 10 € for one month of unlimited use. Public transportation in Lyon (bus, tram, metro) cost 28 € for one month of unlimited use for students. The tram in Angers cost 11.50 € for 10 trips. During the study tour and internship all transportation is provided. Additionally, with SNCF (trains) and EasyJet (airplanes) there is reasonably priced transportation available all throughout France, and throughout Europe. I personally prefer trains to airplanes, so I mostly used SNCF to travel. There is a discount card for young people available through SNCF, called a “Carte Jeune.” It costs 50 € to buy, but every train ticket purchased afterward is discounted at up to 60%. I purchased one, and it paid for itself and then some.
Communication

This was one subject on which I could not find any useful information before I left. When I arrived in France I went to the store of one of the major cell phone providers (Orange) where I bought a basic cell phone and 400 minutes valid for 6 months (sending a text message used 40 seconds of time). This cost me 107 €, which was really not a good deal. After watching how other international students deal with this issue I have come to the conclusion that the best option is to buy/acquire an unlocked cell phone before leaving the states, and to purchase a French SIM card and minutes upon arrival. Free and SFR have been recommended to me as the best French cell phone providers.

Health and Safety

When I first arrived in France I felt slightly vulnerable as a young, inexperienced traveler and was very careful of traveling at night or alone. However, as I got used to living in France I became much more comfortable and never had any problems of feeling unsafe. Of course, street logic is important – always carry a cell phone, if possible travel with a buddy, try not to attract attention (i.e. public drunkenness) late at night, and so on. Personally, I never felt I had any reason to feel unsafe.

As far as health, it is necessary to contact your health care provider before departure to see how you will be covered abroad. The situation can be slightly tricky, though, for prescriptions. I had to pay for 6 months of a prescription out of pocket, but could apply for reimbursement from my health insurance provider after I returned. This was the only way for me to get the prescription while abroad. Your options will all depend on your health insurance provider. Cornell also offers emergency insurance through MEDEX Global Solutions, which provides medical evacuation and repatriation services.

Internship Experience

Editor’s Note: Stacey’s experience was unfortunate and unprecedented for this program. Upon hearing of Stacy’s concerns, the program coordinators were immediately contacted to resolve the issue and find her a more suitable placement.

You may have noticed while reading about my classes and schedule abroad that the location of my internship changed from Gers to Gaillac. My first internship was far from perfect, and there were several aspects that ultimately brought me to ask for a new placement.

The family aspect. In my study abroad application I explained, fairly explicitly, that the family aspect of my internship was very important to me. I mentioned that I like kids, I want to learn how to cook, and in general I wanted to spend time with my family. When it came time I was placed in an internship working for and living with a 30-year-old man and his father. The winery was in a VERY small rural town (for example, there was nothing within walking distance of the house), and both the son and his father had grown up in a near-by city. Thus, every weekend they both traveled to that city, and lived in separate apartments there. Their lives really only intersected for work, and at all other times they spent their time apart. For me it was really difficult to understand where I fit into their lives outside of work.

The academic aspect. In my study abroad application I expressed interest in the marketing and business aspects of the wine industry, since I have very little experience in these areas. Thus, before I began my internship it was determined that my main project would be to contact importers in the US and try to create new business partnerships between them and the winery, ultimately resulting in new sales. In reality very little time at my internship was spent on that project, and almost all of the time I was able to work on it was alone. Much of the work I ended up doing was unskilled labor, and did not allow very much opportunity to learn.

Overall exchange experience

My experiences at my first internship were very challenging, and definitely not fun. I had some fantastic experiences in France, but it wouldn’t be fair to say that there weren’t some really hard times as well. Being in this internship forced me to politely but firmly stand up for myself and take responsibility for my experiences, to remain professional and polite even if others were not, and to look for the good things in every day despite being very unhappy. During the internship I was, to say the least, not pleased with my predicament. However, as the saying goes, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. It wasn’t fun, but I made it through and can now better appreciate my life at Cornell and the other more enjoyable experiences I had in France.

Overall, I am very glad I participated in this program. I’m very proud of myself for facing the challenges I faced
and making it through, despite the fact that I wasn’t always enjoying myself. When people ask me, “how was France?” I don’t even know how to begin to respond. It was so many things – beautiful, scary, exciting, lonely, fun, inspiring.