

Travel Report

Institut d'Études Politiques Aix-en-Provence, France

Fall 17

M.Sc. European Affairs

Aix-en-Provence

Aix-en-Provence is a beautiful little town in the south of France. The city is located close to the metropolis of Marseille. Aix-en-Provence itself is rather calm and very wealthy, but especially the numerous street markets and lively streets make it a real treasure and an enjoyable Mediterranean atmosphere.

The surroundings are very attractive, a lot of sport activities such as hiking, swimming, sailing and biking are popular leisure time activities. Due to its close location to the Côte d'Azur, Aix-en-Provence and the area around it are not only attractive for tourists but especially a great opportunity to spend a few months there as an exchange student.

Institut d'Études Politiques Aix-en-Provence

The IEP is a well-known and renowned university in France. The IEP Aix-en-Provence is one of numerous campuses all around France, Aix is the only one located at the Mediterranean coast. The IEP Aix is considered to be a 'Grande école', which is a prestigious label especially French students are keen on having on their CV when it comes to studying political science. French students have to pass a strict 'concours' to enter those schools, expectations for French students are accordingly high.

Regardless of the high numbers of applications, IEP Aix is a rather small school with about 2.000 students in total, about 120 of them are Erasmus students each semester. The school is beautifully located in the centre of the old town opposite to the cathedral. The building itself is nice, partly newly renovated and comfortable to spend time in.

Arrival

The IEP organized a really nice and welcoming breakfast which made it easy to meet other Erasmus students right away. After, we had an introductory meeting where we were informed about courses and the selection process. The course list was sent to us in June already, but we were only able to choose them on arrival. Also, there is an international association which set up a Facebook group for Erasmus students well in advance which was very good and helpful upon arrival. They also organized city tours, parties and trips during the semester.

Courses

Generally, Erasmus students get a specific course catalogue which you have to stick to. Most courses are on a bachelor level. A number of courses is offered in English, but it might be difficult to make 30 ECTS solely in English so expect to take at least one course in French. Of course your selection depends on your personal preferences, but often you are not able to choose all that much due to schedule overlapping. This happens especially if you aim at making 30 ECTS per semester, you will find hardly anyone who does it. This is a rather ambitious amount of credits for Erasmus students and the schedule is fuller than in Sweden, but absolutely manageable. Also, expect to mostly sit in class, listen, take notes and then learn everything by heart! There is not much of an interaction between students and professors, nor do you engage in discussions during class. On the other hand, it allows you to learn a lot of fact-based knowledge. I took the following courses:

Geopolitics of the Indian Subcontinent (English; 4 ECTS)

One of my favourite courses! Alix Phillipon is a great teacher who has lived in Pakistan for a few years herself and has an incredible knowledge on Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. Especially when you focus on Europe your entire studies, you feel like you are entering a whole new world through this course. Content-wise she talks about history, politics, economics and relations of the respective country with its neighbours. Highly interesting and recommendable! The exam was a 1 hour written exam consisting of one question.

France in a Global context (English; 4 ECTS)

The name promises a bit more than the content, the course basically consists of French history from the middle-age up to today. Partly interesting, but often a bit pointless. The professor (A. Met-Domestici) also isn't the most motivated, but a very nice and understanding person. The exam consisted of 1 hour written exam consisting of one essay question.

Religion and International Relations (English; 4 ECTS)

Generally, a really good course, unfortunately the teachers English is difficult to understand which makes it hard to understand the content sometimes. But the course gives a good insight on different religions and their role in international relations. Also the course allows you to focus on the topic you are interested in as you prepare a 15 Minute power point presentation about a topic you are interested in as an exam.

La vie politique française (French; 4 ECTS)

One of the more challenging courses as the pace was rather high. The course dealt with French politics and institutional set-ups and the constitution. I learned incredibly much about French politics there. I highly recommend it and also recommend to get one of the books Mr.

Mirman recommends in the beginning of the course as it helps you to read up. He also wants you to take notes yourself and does not provide his power point slides. The exam was a 20 minute oral exam which was challenging but doable!

Géopolitique de la Méditerranée (French; 4 ECTS)

Again, a challenging but really good course! This is also one of the few course where French students attend as well. This course incorporates aspects such as the civil wars in the Mediterranean region, water shortage, of course politics and history and many other aspects. We specifically talked about Syria, Israel, Turkey, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco and Cyprus. Mr. Bruyère- Ostelle is an extremely good teacher with an inexhaustible source of knowledge. As the course is also meant for French students, the pace is quite high but most French students are happy to share their notes with you. Also, there are separate exams for Erasmus and French students. The exam was a 1 hour written exam consisting of 3 questions.

Relations internationales contemporaines (French; 5 ECTS¹)

A course which requires you to be a bit more active, as you have to prepare a power point presentation, do readings as well as hand-in a literature review once in the semester. This course specifically challenged me by its French language, as I had to read academic texts in French and produce them myself. It was a great exercise, even though the content itself (international theories) is not the most exciting. There also is no final exam, but your final grade consists of your oral participation during the semester, your presentation and your literature review.

Civilisation Française (French; 5 ECTS)

Again, one of the ‘active’ courses where you hold two power point presentations with a group on an assigned topic. The course deals with French culture including food, history, politics, movies etc. What is nice about it is that you get to choose quite freely what you want to talk about and how you want to do it. Working with others is also nice! Here again, the final grade consists of your performance throughout the semester.

Accommodation

You will get an email regarding registration for student accommodation in Aix early summer. I highly recommend applying even if you do not plan on staying in a student accommodation, as it can be quite tricky to find an affordable alternative. The student accommodations are also near to the centre, Les gazelles –where I stayed – was within walking distance (2 km) from IEP. The accommodation itself is not necessarily pretty, but as you spent most time outside

¹ Courses for 5 ECTS have a mandatory attendance.

anyways, it doesn't matter all that much. What is a bit difficult though is cooking, as you share one kitchen (no oven) with about 50 people. Even though it is cleaned every day, it is quite messy and overcrowded most of the times. Les Gazelle has a good cafeteria where you can get a good selection of meals for lunch for about 3€ and in the evenings, there is a great pizzeria specifically for students on the property. So there is ways to avoid the kitchen sometimes....

My room as a 9 qm² room with a fridge and a separate bathroom and it was alright for a few months. Also, most Erasmus students live in those accommodations, so you will meet people easily. Les Gazelles is definitely one of the newer ones!

Other than that I was mostly satisfied with the accommodation, other than some administrative chaos you can find in Aix lot everywhere though. Always keep any piece of paper/receipt they gave you! You might need them in future to proof, that you have already payed rent etc.

Fun and leisure

As mentioned before, there is Erasmus parties organised by the international group, but there is many other 'nations' that organise parties everywhere in town. Also, you can easily engage in one of the 'nations' depending on what you are interested in.

Otherwise the nature around Aix is just breath-taking! From mountains to seaside there is much to see and explore. It is definitely worth it to rent a car for a day or two with others and explore! Everyone should have climbed the Saint Victoire at least once and bathed in the sea many more times! Hiking is only possible from October though, as the risk of bushfires is high in the region. I have specifically enjoyed the area north of Aix called 'Luberon', where you can find many small villages, agriculture, the famous lavender fields and amazing views! Only accessible by car!

Marseille is perfect whenever you need some more space and big city life, the harbour is lovely and reachable within 30 minutes by bus from Aix.

Costs

Generally, Aix is rather expensive as it is a tourist city. On the other hand, rent is much cheaper if you stay in a student accommodation (290€). Also groceries are generally cheaper than in Sweden, often cheaper on the market than in the supermarket as many farmers sell their products directly! So overall life in Aix is a little cheaper than in Sweden I would say.

Other

People in the South of France are very welcoming and nice, but can still be rough at times! So do not expect the Swedish politeness and do not be offended when people seem to be very direct. Also, most French students are very competitive for the reasons I have stated above. They are at times hard to get in touch with, but this is of course not generalizable and some are really welcoming and interested in improving their language skills by getting in contact with international students!

Also, the administration at IEP Aix is very chaotic at times. Do not hesitate to contact the international office. They are really nice people that at times can't keep up. So be persistent on any matter!