

A.J. Pressland fund travel report

Deux semaines à Aix-en-Provence

By Julia Yan



Lavender fields we drove past in the region of Provence | 2019 July

Introduction



With the financial support from the A.J.Pressland fund, I managed to do a 2-week French language course in Aix-en-Provence this summer from 24th June to 7th July. This has been one of the most valuable experiences I have had in my life. It was in fact my very first time travelling alone to a country that I barely speak its language. The journey of gradually adapting to the culture and life style had a significant impact on my French level. However, skills that I have learnt from this trip was far beyond the spoken language itself, and such experiences shaped me in a more independent and well-rounded person in terms of my adaptability and sociability. Throughout this solo journey, I learned to embrace solitude and confront the inner self that I have neglected for so long under the stress of Cambridge's treadmill lifestyle. Southern France is so beautiful a place to stimulate thoughts and through observations, conversations, and sensations I was inspired to live my life in a much different, mindful manner. All my experiences and photos will be shared in this report.



Detailed information regarding the trip and the course.

Institution: IS Aix-en-Provence

- I found the institution through the list of recommended language schools provided by the language centre. It is a boutique institution situated in a house on the outskirts of Aix-en-Provence, around 20 minutes' walk from the city centre. It offers level from A0 to C2 with subsets of classes within each level, depending on the entrance test one takes on the first day of the course. Beyond the in-class teachings, many activities and excursions in town or around the Provence region are organized by the school to encourage students practicing French in real life, for instance museum tours, wine tasting sessions, painting classes, food festivals, pétan (classic French sports for leisure), hiking and so on.

Institution website: www.is-aix.com

Course taken: Français Général with 20 lessons per week for 2 weeks A2 level - (€650)

Duration: 24th June to 7th July 2019

Class size: Maximum 10 students

Additional tutorials: Grammar class, speaking tutorials, workshops on specific topics

Activities participated: Pétanque, food festival, museum tours

Accommodation: Homestay Bed&Breakfast arranged by the institution -(€295) There are many other options provided by the institution including various stars hotels and studios. I would recommend the homestay option as I improved my speaking the most on dinner tables.

Total expenditure including food and transportations: €1200



The fountain that I walked past every morning on my way to school | 2019 June

Pourquoi Aix-en-provence?



A street in city centre leading to a market | 2019 June

I have visited the city briefly before during the Easter holiday of my first year in Cambridge, and since then I have always wanted to go back. It was a mixture of the atmosphere of the city, the legacy of the art, and the locals that captured my heart. Never have I felt so relaxed and chilled walking down the alleys and visiting the art galleries, it is a magical city that slows down people's pace and allow them to absorb the beauty of both the nature and existence of human being. The city itself was inspirational for its vibrancy, colors and artistes.

As a matter of fact, that brief visit was the precise reason that prompted me to start learning French as it grew in me a profound interest in French culture and history of art vitalized by this city. I wanted to communicate with the locals beyond "bonjour" and "merci" to know more about their culture, and I believe that one can never truly understand a culture without speaking its language. Furthermore, I find the French language so elegant and beautiful in its pronunciations and words.

Another rather practical reason that I chose this city was that generally in smaller cities less people speak English, which in turn forces me to step out of my comfort zone and practice my broken French. I vividly remember the struggle on my first day trying to buy a bunch of flowers for my homestay host, yet did the shop keeper speak a bare minimum English, I would have missed that valuable opportunity to burst out all the remotely relevant French words for flowers in my head. It was a full immersion of the French environment for me.

Dans mes classes



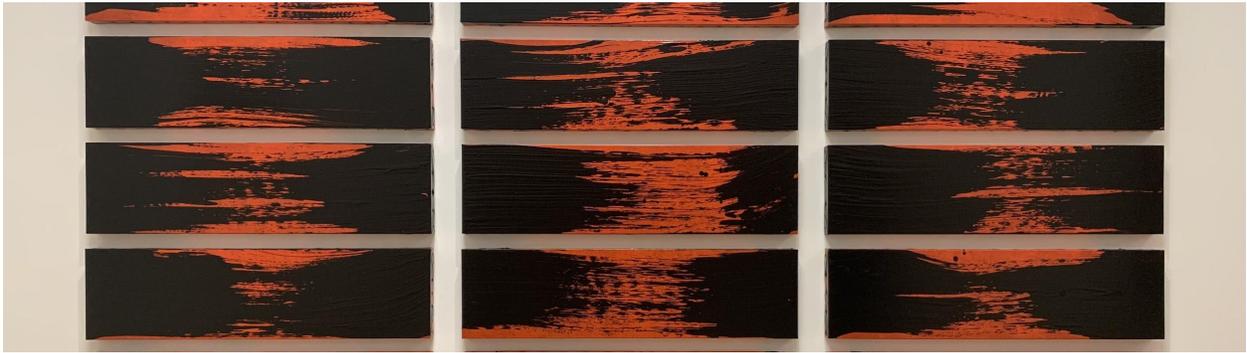
A typical scene during the lesson | 2019 June

On the first day of the programme, everyone had to take a test that encompass four aspects of the language, namely speaking, listening, reading and writing, in order to accurately assess one's level. The results came out during the lunch time after a half an hour town tour, and I was put into the upper class of A2.

The class was very interactive and speaking based, with the first 30 minutes on guided discussion of daily experiences, such as what we have been doing the day before or what we will be doing during the weekend. It was then followed by a grammar session, with mainly the teacher going through a specific tense and we practice it via answering a set of questions and discussing them in class. A 20 minutes break took place between the two lessons, which is when we freely socialize with our classmates or people from different levels, we were very much encouraged to speak French during the break which made the conversations quite broken in a funny way. After the break, the lesson was again split into two halves, with the first 30 minutes listening to clips from the movie, radio or interview and trying to comprehend them and the final half an hour dedicated to discussing a topic presented by a classmate. The presentation part was my favourite bit, which I found the most entertaining and useful. Each day, a person in the class had to present a topic for 5-10 minutes, followed by a class discussion around that topic. Since there was no limitation on the subjects of the presentation, we had to sit through the most bizarre and random topics, ranging from what if the earth was made of blueberries to comparison of medical systems between developed countries and developing countries. Through this, I managed to learn a diversified set of vocabularies that somehow always come in handy under the most unexpected daily encounters.

I really appreciate the structure of the teaching in this institution as it was very practical and placed a huge focus on speaking, i.e. utilizing the language. I ended up being able to navigate around France and have basic communications with the locals quite fluently after the end of the course.

Mon temps libre



A temporary exhibition in Musée Granet | 2019 June



Permanent collection of Paul Cézanne's work in Musée Granet | 2019 June

During my free time, which was usually in the afternoon when there was no additional grammar and speaking tutorials, I would grab a panini or baguette with friends and sit on the stairs in front of a church chatting and eating. Then I would visit the museums and art galleries in Aix-en-Provence. There were so much to see in the city as the city was literally dotted with art works. I really took time to read descriptions of each art work and absorb myself into it, and sometimes with people I met at the school, we would share our feelings and thoughts about a particular piece of work and be amazed at how different the impact of the same work has on individuals. Residents in the city were so kind and approachable, sometimes I would find myself engaged with the locals into a conversation of cultural differences or the female football world cup.

Other afternoons during the week, the school would organize events outside the classroom. My favourite activity was the pétanque, which was a really chilled French “sport” usually played during holidays. The whole school would go to a park and started playing each other in groups, accompanied by free wine and paella. We had to speak French of course during the activities and it involved a substantial amount of body languages for me.

Dinner time was when I gained the most insight into French culture from my homestay host and improved the most in my speaking. She spoke a tiny bit of English and we would chat about the French politics, classism, history of arts, cuisines and so on using a mixture of the two languages.

Pendant la fin de semaine

Weekends were the best time to explore the regions. For the first weekend, I took a short bus journey to Marseille and walked around the city for a good 15km before we settled on the beach at the edge of the city. Navigating through the public transportation was a struggle for me, as most of the drivers only spoke French. I almost took the wrong bus on the way back and for multiple times found myself in a rather awkward situation. But thanks to this experience, I no longer rely on others to take me around a new place as I am confident enough to be able to resolve unexpected situations calmly.

Marseille was so different in comparison to Aix-en-Provence, it was a lot larger and hence much more buzzing with so diversified groups of residents. I loved it so much that I visited there three times within the two weeks. For the second time I was there, I went with two friends made from the course, we climbed a hill to see the harbor, took a stroll in the old town, had ice-creams next to the sea and spoke a lot of French. The locals were really nice, chatty and patient. We ended up randomly chatting to a café owner about French culture and his passion for coffee, in French of course. I think it's definitely these small encounters and random conversations that helps improving my French significantly, and is precisely why I think the best way to learn a language is to visit the place and immerse in it.

A day trip to Marseille | 2019 June

On the second weekend, a few people in my class decided to rent a car and drive around Provence region to see the lavender fields, and we stumbled across a huge field of sunflowers which was absolutely stunning. It was such a spontaneously road trip and was in fact my first road trip ever with people around my age. There were so many skills and tips that I learned from this trip that I would never be able to obtain from lectures in Cambridge – at one point we had to change the wheel ourselves. We made a playlist of all road trip songs in French and was playing memory games to test each other's French level. As I am writing this, the image of us driving past the gigantic fields of lavenders, the sound of French country music, the distinctive smell of the lavenders and the laughter in the car as a result of the memory games suddenly all come back alive and recalling it still makes me smile.

I was taught in one of the Cambridge mindfulness sessions that we need to build up resources inside us that we can draw back to when our stress level overshoot, and the two weeks in France definitely had a huge contribution to my resources. My self-confidence has really built up from this journey in France.

A day trip to Provence | 2019 June



One of my classmates had a villa at the outskirts of Aix-en-Provence, and kindly invited us all to have a chilled Sunday afternoon. There was a huge swimming pool surrounded by flowers and bees where I paddled with a floating board.



It was so tranquil an afternoon, we chatted a lot about our lives, the stresses and the rewards, the past and the future. It was a real bonding moment when we discovered that regardless the nationalities, the backgrounds, the cultures, deeply we share the same emotions and moral values. We also rented together about Brexit and Donald Trump.

Some people in the group spoke fluent French and put up a live French lesson to the rest of us beginners. I was taught the common expressions, the words used by the present youth but not really taught in the books, the special terminologies about the French history and so on. We also watched the French film – *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* together. Through this, I gathered a broader and “down to the earth” knowledge of French culture and language.

A weekend at a classmate’s villa | 2019 July



Finale

The two weeks in France have passed so quickly, yet I came home with loaded memories and experiences. I have to admit that it was the best times and I am eternally grateful for the financial support provided by the Pressland Fund, which enabled me to have this incredible experience. I carried away with me a new attitude towards life, valuable friendships, independency and adaptability, and most importantly a significantly improved French. I am going to take French as an option for my fourth year Chemical Engineering course and will continue so after my degree. I have always wanted to work in United Nation and hopefully being able to speak fluently three UN official languages would make the journey smoother. I would highly recommend anyone who wants to improve a language to take the opportunities to live in that country for sometimes as this really puts everything from the textbooks into perspectives.

Finally, I would like to share some personal thoughts that sprouted from the trip:

As human beings, we seek for recognition and acknowledgement from the others to solidify the sense of existence, and hence inevitably falling into the endless pursuit of goals that is commonly perceived as successful by the society. We are hence trapped in a bubble of homogenized values and pursuing the seemingly collectively acknowledged best outcomes of one's life is just any easier way out. We, those that are in the same bubble, keep reinforcing ourselves the socially constructed "success model" and through dedicated pursuit of such path we supply each other this essential sense of acknowledgement. We are taught to think of life as a series of dots on a map leading to the ultimate success, somewhere along the way we have forgotten to understand what the individual dots actually mean. What I have learned from the journey is that the beauty of life lies precisely upon the fact that it is unique and full of surprises for every single person, and hence it is more than okay to deviate from the socially constructed "success" path and take a moment to consider what actually matters to me as a person and what I want to make out of the life.



The food festival in Aix-en-Provence | 2019 July