

## Sciences Po Fall Semester 2013 Report

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*“To study in Paris is to be born in Paris.” –Victor Hugo*

In the fall of 2013 I had the privilege of attending the Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA) at Sciences Po in Paris, France. The experience was, in short, incredible and something that I would wish everyone to have the opportunity to go through. I enjoyed my classes, which had a focus on international security, such as war, terrorism, and the Middle East. The professors were both from the academic world and from the “outside” world, which resulted in courses benefiting from knowledge and examples from both theory and praxis. The students were curious, interested in the world, and fiercely bright, which made classes a true challenge and great pleasure. In my semester abroad I also took the opportunity to travel a bit in France, visiting the cities of Marseille, Bordeaux and Strasbourg.

Having never been to France prior to this semester abroad, I was a bit wary of the upcoming experience as I spoke no French and had heard mixed reviews of the French people. As is usually the case, some of what was said I could relate to and other points I found no support for. If you do not speak French, yes, your time in France will be more difficult. While most French do speak basic English, they are reluctant to use it because they often do not think that their English is good enough and thus usually just say that they do not speak English. Apologizing for my lack of knowledge regarding the French language before posing a question in English was usually a successful strategy for me. I never had anyone ever pretend not to hear me or refuse to help me, as I have heard has happened to many acquaintances and friends of mine. I did have a French class that I took twice a week, but Sciences Po is not really known for its great language courses and my class was nothing to boast of either. It was a great way to meet people and make friends while trying to learn French together, but ultimately I unfortunately have very little to show for it. Sciences Po, and PSIA especially, are extremely international and many classes are held in English so there is no problem with meeting people that speak English (or German, Italian, Spanish, Hindi, Russian etc.).

I am extremely glad that I decided to attend PSIA within Sciences Po, because when choosing my classes I was able to select among ten different masters programs. When applying to Sciences Po as a master student, one has the option of choosing from almost all of the programs that the institution offers. I chose PSIA because I liked the masters programs and I figured that I would be surrounded by students from around the world who were all interested in learning about problems that the world faces today and that they would be fascinating people to talk to — I was right. As the social groups were usually a completely heterogeneous assembly of individuals from literally around the world, conversations included discussing political, social, cultural and economic situations in everyone’s countries and learning about how my friends perceived their countries and also the rest of the world. Everyone was involved in one or more projects that were dear to them (women’s rights in India, journalism in Israel, the social construction of a city, the plight in Kashmir) and it was fascinating to gain insight into topics that I was previously not well-versed in. The people that I met want to literally change the world and I have no doubt that they will succeed. Spending time with people whose aspirations and goals seem to be larger-than-life has inspired me in my path in life and what direction I want to go into. Furthermore, being able to represent the Zeppelin University amidst students who came from prestigious universities such as Johns Hopkins, Georgetown and St. Stephens College was an honor.

The classes that I took at PSIA were very challenging, with most classes requiring one to read 3-4 articles per week and all of the courses having a midterm and a final. Furthermore, only two absences are allowed (any more and you fail the class) which I found to be quite annoying. I only had one presentation, which was a nice break from the seemingly endless presentations that have to be given in classes at German universities. About half of the work that we did was group work, with midterms often being 48-hour papers that were to be done in a group over a weekend. Quite an interesting concept and one that I was always lucky with concerning my group members. The courses were more France-based than I thought they would be (i.e. in Defense and Security Economics we looked at the French defense system more so than any other system), but that was also exciting. All in all, however, I noticed that the courses that I took had a more practical as well as international application than the classes that I took at ZU.

Sciences Po offers many activities where one can get involved, be they political, social, media-related or even sports groups. I personally did not participate in any of these because the meetings were often held in French and many projects spanned over a greater period of time than one semester. However, I was involved in one of the Rotaract clubs in Paris, which allowed me to get to know Parisians and participate in events that benefited Alzheimer research, for example. Getting involved in something, be it Sciences Po-related or something else, is a great way to meet people. Facebook is also a much-used medium at Sciences Po (kind of like at ZU), and joining groups is very helpful when it comes to finding an apartment, getting help for university related questions, or for being informed about parties or other events that are taking place in Paris.

Aside from greatly enjoying my time at the university, with the variety of course topics, knowledgeable professors and interesting students, Paris itself is also a phenomenal city. Sciences Po is so central that it is possible to walk to many places right after class (such as the Opera house and surrounding shopping district, Saint Michel, which is filled with cafes, restaurants and boutiques, the Louvre, the Musée d'Orsay, the famous bridge with the locks, and the Marais district, which is also filled with bars, restaurants and boutiques etc.). As the weather was abnormally warm this fall/winter (I did not have to wear my winter boots or jacket once!) I walked in the city when possible. The plethora of museums and other cultural events is astonishing, with EU citizens under age 26 getting in for free, or for a reduced rate, in many places. My one regret is that I did not make enough time for this.

Not only was Paris a city that I was able to explore, but when possible I also traveled on the weekends. It is possible to get great deals on train tickets with sncf, but it is best to book these trips at least a month in advance. I spent a weekend in Marseille, where we were able to take a boat to a nearby island and thus had a great view of the port upon our return. We also went to Bordeaux for a weekend, and were able to participate in a chateau and winetasting tour on one of the afternoons. In December I also went to Strasbourg to visit Jelena, the ZU student who was studying there, and see the Christmas markets. I am extremely glad that I made the time to visit other parts of France, because too many people failed to do this and towards the end of the semester many students were sad that they had not made more use of their time and seen other parts of France. So taking the time to travel in France is something that I would recommend for any students attending Sciences Po or other French universities.

This semester was perhaps the best I had in all of my time studying and something I would recommend to anyone! There was a lot of organization involved (finding an apartment, opening a bank account, getting a cell number, getting a student ID card, getting a metro ticket, organizing which classes

one wants to attend-see Vivicas report from the Spring 2013) but it was worth every phone call, email, and trudging through bureaucratic red tape to get everything sorted out.