

# Semester Abroad at the Université Grenoble Alpes

Winter Semester 2022/23

## INTRODUCTION

For my third semester in my civil engineering masters, I went abroad to Grenoble in the French Alps. To be honest, I chose the Université Grenoble Alpes (UGA) primarily because I wanted to go to France to improve my French and because I love the Alps, not because I was that interested in the subjects that were provided at the university. Despite this, the studies turned out to be quite interesting and I could branch out a bit from my typical topics. The scenery in the mountains was as impressive as expected. For me it was the second time I had been on a semester abroad and after having to wait due to Covid I was really looking forward to experiencing it again.



*Mont Moucherotte above Grenoble*

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## STUDIES

The first difference to note is that in France the semesters begin and end earlier and are a bit shorter than in Germany. Because of the latter, the semester itself is quite packed and having a timetable with every hour of the day being filled with classes is normal. I had friends who were studying all day long, so depending on your personal goals for this semester you might not want to pack-in too many credits. Weirdly enough, because I had a lot of block-courses it was either a full week or I had almost nothing to do.

This master program is quite special and differs a bit from most others at the university, because it was directly incorporated into a research institute and a kind of program for future PhD-students. That meant, that it is mostly shielded off to the normal departments of the university. The studies were fully in English and were focusing very much on experimental research and theoretics in the field of geomechanics and rock and soil behaviour. Of 24 students only two were French, the rest came from all over the world. This blend made for an exceptional multi-cultural experience, which I liked a lot.

As I was hinting with the school-like timetable, university in France is a lot more like normal school. With one professor we weren't allowed to join the class when we were late and had to do small assignments or got marks over the course of the semester. Modules are held in classrooms and you have a very close and friendly connection to the professors. In general, the quality of the education was quite high and very connected to the current state of the art in research. We had a lot of labs where we had to do experiments, which I wasn't familiar with from my studies in Hannover and which I liked a lot.



*Main STEM-library on campus*

## CAMPUS LIFE

The main campus where all of my modules were located is allegedly the biggest in France and is dominated by trees and greenery. It has multiple train and bus stops, as it would take you a while to walk from one end to another. No wonder it is so spacious, as it has to fit all of the 60.000+ students.



*Main plaza on campus - The neon lights change colour according to the energy consumption of the city.*

Student housing can be very hit or miss in Grenoble, that's why I opted for finding a privately shared flat. I don't know though if I would advise anyone to do the same, as it was a struggle to get accepted as a foreigner searching from afar. I barely found anything and it was a very stressful ordeal. I would probably advise you to apply for student housing and just opt for a private one when you are unfortunate enough to be assigned to one of the abysmal dorms. I know a lot of people who did it like that and they had an easier time finding something while being there physically.



*Wall painting on the outskirts of Grenoble, close to campus*

The canteens were sadly not very impressive as there was a huge amount of waiting involved due to bad organisation. As a vegetarian I also had a hard time getting good meals. Most of the time they didn't

offer any real vegetarian meals but instead you only get the side dishes of the meat dish, but for the same price. For vegans the options are even grimmer, a trend which is sadly common in everyday life in France as well. Be prepared that some restaurants in France might not even have a single main-dish without meat or fish. The bakeries on the other hand are excellent and usually offer very good sandwiches for every diet at lunch time.

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## THE CITY

Grenoble is located in a valley between three mountain massifs. It has around 700.000 inhabitants when counting all the suburbs, the Banlieues. In fact, the main campus is located in one of those, but still only 10 min away from the city centre by tram or bike. I would advise on renting a bike as Grenoble is quite bike friendly. Allegedly, it is the most bike friendly city in France. Don't expect it to be like in the Netherlands, but nevertheless it is quite nice.



*Centre of Grenoble*

The city has a small but very nice old town from the late Middle Ages with small streets and a lot of restaurants and bars. In the night all students are in the centre enjoying a glass of wine or beer. There is also a newer part of the old town from the 19<sup>th</sup> century which features facades similar to Paris, which is also a lovely sight to behold. The most prominent feature of the city is the Bastille, a fort which is located on a hillside right next to the city centre, overlooking the valley. It is a lovely spot to see the sunset or have a nice view to the snow-covered mountains of the Belledonne, which rise to almost 3000 meters. An old mountain gondola connects the centre to the fort.



*View over Grenoble from the Bastille during the sunset*

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## LEISURE TIME

When it comes to leisure activities everything revolves around the mountains in Grenoble. If you like hiking, mountaineering, climbing or skiing, the region will have plenty to offer to you. It takes half an hour to get to the mountain ranges close-by and there are multiple bus routes leading into mountain villages, where hiking trails start. When you want to visit the high Alps the National Park Écrins is also not too far, featuring peaks above 4.000 meters. The nature there is breath-taking and you can visit mountain lakes and glaziers.



*Villar-d'Arène, National Park Écrins in autumn*

When winter is beginning the skiing season is opened. There are four skiing resorts in the region around Grenoble, two of them being at an altitude of up to 3.500 meters, which means that there is always natural snow and no snow canons are required. There is a student-skiing-card which I highly recommend, which discounts the price for a day-ticket to only 15 € and also provides a generous

discount on the shuttle bus to the resort as well as on the hiring cost for the gear. The resorts aren't that packed especially during the weekdays and there is almost no waiting time at the lifts, it really was a pleasure to ski here.



*Alps in winter – view from the skiing resort Alpe d'Huez*

There is also much more to see than just the mountains. There are a lot of architectural places to visit from small villages to the big cities of Lyon, Annecy and Geneve. The Provence and even Piedmont in Italy are also not too far away for a week-end trip. Grenoble itself also has a variety of museums to offer, especially the art museum is quite famous.

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## CONCLUSION

In the end it was one of the best experiences I've had yet. If you value nature, especially in the mountains, and nature related sports in any way, you will find Grenoble one of the best places to be. The same is true for anyone wanting to deepen their knowledge in underground engineering and soil mechanics. UGA is one of the leading universities in this field and offers excellent education.

In general, the variety of the location is vast and anyone can really choose in what they want their semester in Grenoble to be. For me it was a very good choice and I will definitely visit the region again.