

# A language-learning sabbatical

**I PLANNED a trip to France to learn French for two reasons.**

I wanted an extended break between finishing my PhD (studying how adult stem cells could be used to repair tendon) and starting my next academic position. Secondly, for many years achieving fluency in French has been a personal goal – not least since I have a French name, but limited ability to speak the language.

Therefore, with great expectations I arrived in Montpellier on 19th July 2009 for eight weeks of French lessons followed by a week of relaxation.

Key preparations for the trip included selecting the location and school, finding

accommodation and budgeting. I chose to book through CESA, an agency based in Cornwall which places students in multiple language schools abroad to learn languages ranging from French to Arabic *in situ*.

Over many e-mails, starting six months prior to departure, this company helped me identify the location which best matched my

budget and ambitions. Using an established agency also provided assurance of the quality of the school and an expectation of support should a problem arise while attending classes in France.

I arranged a flat-share (with French speakers) readily using

Appartager.com, although CESA can also arrange a variety of accommodation placements including in student residencies, with French host families or in private hotels.

I chose an “intensive” course involving preparation for the DELF B1 examination. DELF is an abbreviation for *Diplôme d'études en langue française* and B1 is the third of six levels of the

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. At the sixth level (C2) students are considered to have mastery of the language.

Of course, there are many types of course packages offered by language schools in France, many of which do not feature examinations. Other options include French with surfing, French for business and courses targeted at specific age groups such as

gap-year students and over 50s. My choice entailed 30 45-minute lessons per week: 20 “standard” and 10 “intensive” lessons.

Standard course teaching was held Monday to Friday and each lesson included grammar points, conversation, oral and written comprehension exercises, and usually finished with a game (such as *Scrabble* or *Twenty questions*).

My first four weeks of “intensive” lessons, held three times a week, were preparation for the DELF examination and were well constructed. Initially, passing this exam seemed like a very tall order, but after practice in class and a lot of homework the exam was not difficult. The DELF B1 is held by some sources to be equivalent to GCSE level, but having achieved an A grade at GCSE, albeit many years previously, I felt that the vocabulary and range of written and oral comprehension was wider at the B1 level.

In my experience the 30 lesson schedule was optimum; although a small number of students took additional private lessons, I was fully stretched learning the new vocabulary and grammar and completing the homework for my 30 lesson schedule.

I did regret not having a good digital French-English dictionary as I spent a large amount of time flicking through the hard copy of the dictionary, when I could have spent this time memorising!

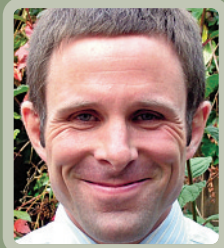
## Electronic translation

Many students used portable electronic translation tools in class and at home. I think, however, that a laptop or netbook (the latter would take up less desk space in class) running the Collins Robert French-English dictionary would be a better investment.

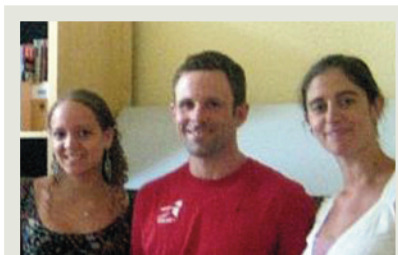
After the DELF B1 exam (week 6) the “intensive” classes no longer focused on exam preparation, and consisted instead of oral and written comprehension exercises and conversation with minimal homework. In addition to developing our language skills, the material in this and the standard class improved our knowledge of French political and cultural life.

I enjoyed all the classes, but received the greatest satisfaction from the appreciable improvement which followed the exam preparation classes.

Prior to arrival the school required an online language skill assessment test to be completed. This test determined which standard class each student first joined. However, it was simple to



**ETIENNE O'BRIEN** takes time out from veterinary work to try and achieve fluency in French



The author flanked by two fellow students in Montpellier.

change classes, up or down in skill level, depending on one's progress.

Teaching was entirely in French, and all conversations in the classroom amongst students were expected to be the same. The students were, on the whole, highly motivated and the teachers consistently impressed me with their energy.

Outside of classes, students of a wide range of nationalities met frequently and the school offered activities such as wine tasting and sightseeing trips which were also good opportunities to socialise.

Montpellier, the eighth largest city in France and growing, is an excellent choice of destination both in terms of city life and as a base to explore France. This city is a student centre for most of the year but during summer months students are replaced by tourists from the north.

## Truly vibrant

Access from the UK is convenient: Ryanair and Easyjet fly directly from Stansted and Luton respectively.

It is a truly vibrant place. The beating heart of the city is the *Place de la Comedie* containing many terraced eateries. During my stay there were public events several times weekly throughout the city, including outdoor cinema and classical and reggae music concerts (all of which were free to attend).

A personal highlight was the street (break) dancers who performed most nights in the *Place de la Comedie* – I



One of many stunning views encountered during the quest for the yeti.

crevasse yawned from the mountainside. I left my skies and cautiously approached the edge, gingerly testing the snow depth with my poles. Icicles and collapsed snow

bridges loomed above a mysterious cavern, but unfortunately it appeared that any yeti residents were out to lunch.

One, however, does not succeed within the demanding world of veterinary cryptozoology by giving up readily. And so I remain determined to continue my quest to bring the benefits of modern medicine to our neglected yetis and other supposedly mythical animals, regardless of how many alpine trips I'm forced to make, or how much skiing I'm forced to do.

After all, yetis deserve our care as much as cats and dogs, so my practice will just have to manage without me for a while.



Unusual sight in the Thunersee.

Etienne O'Brien, BVM&S, CertVA, CertEP, PhD, MRCVS, graduated from Edinburgh in 1999 and completed an internship and residency in equine practice and orthopaedics at the Royal Veterinary College. Thanks to a Horserace Betting Levy Board Veterinary Research Training Scholarship, he studied for a PhD at the University of Manchester which was awarded in 2009. His thesis title was An evaluation of whether multipotent mesenchymal stromal cells may be used to improve the quality of tendon repair. He is currently a post-doctoral fellow at the McCaig Institute for Bone and Joint Health at the University of Calgary, Canada.

found their athleticism and artistry spellbinding. Elsewhere, every Friday during the summer several hundred people enjoyed *Les Estivales*, a wine-tasting festival with stalls serving local food and live music.

The city is compact and the tram system makes travel simple, and bikes can be rented from many locations city-wide for just €4 per day; you can even cycle to the beach. There are several beaches to choose from, the nearest is only 20 minutes by bus.

Other features of Montpellier are the well-maintained Olympic pool and athletics track. It was necessary to keep windows closed at night due to the bustling nightlife followed later by street cleaning and refuse collection. My flatmates told me that it was difficult to sleep during June without fans or air conditioning but during July and August the city was comfortably hot. September was noticeably cooler with occasional showers.

Paris, surprisingly, is only 3.5 hours away with the TGV from Montpellier. I made several trips outside of my adopted city, but concentrated on the local areas. Nimes contains the best preserved Roman amphitheatre in the world which, according to the audio guide, has been voted by Spanish journalists as offering the best bull fighting spectacle outside of Spain.

In Arles, a temporary residence for Van Gogh and where he severed part of his own ear, I stumbled upon an afternoon of bull fighting. This was a low point as I could not share the excitement of most people around me for what I felt was a barbaric spectacle.

My first exposure was late morning when I walked past the Breton/cob cross ponies tied up outside the arena. I learnt that the role of these animals was to drag the slaughtered bull from the arena. I was invited to return after lunch to watch the picadors' horses being prepared.

#### Unease and curiosity

The task of these performers is to lance the bull's neck so that the animal tends to lower its head and charge in a straight line. The horses are protected from the bull's horns by heavy, padded canvas blankets.

With a mixture of unease and curiosity I joined a crowd on a high point outside the arena which offered both a clear view of the centre and an even closer view of the butchers' hall at the back. Although the *coup de grace* occurred off centre, outside of our view, we heard cheers and saw the bull fighters collecting bouquets from the appreciative crowd after the animals had been dispatched.

Minutes later, the dead bulls were

pulled by tractor around the back of the arena to just below our vantage point. After butchering, the carcasses were transferred to refrigerated lorries. This cycle was repeated at less than 30 minute intervals on at least four occasions. Perhaps I could have spent this day more happily visiting wineries along the Rhone.

In conclusion, my trip was a success: it provided the break which I needed and although I have not yet achieved fluency in French, I made significant progress towards this goal. Having seen Jonny Wilkinson being interviewed in French, after signing for Toulon, I think our skill levels are, in this regard, comparable.

I also enjoyed learning about French culture, both in lessons and expanding my knowledge of wine

and food, in particular ice-cream. I would happily return to Montpellier but I will probably try to extend my experience of France by choosing another destination for my next trip.

On the next occasion I will ensure that the course again includes preparation for a DELF exam and, if possible, will visit for longer and take a break from lessons midway.



An eye-catching sculpture in Montpellier.

## Under the skin

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### 2,000th donor for blood bank

PET Blood Bank UK (PBBuk) reports that it welcomed its 2,000th donor recently when a five-year-old greyhound from Dudley visited the charity's blood collection session at Manor Vets in Cradley Heath, in the West Midlands.

PBBuk was launched at Crufts in March 2007 by Vets Now, after a change in legislation in October 2005 made it possible for vets to store pet blood.

### 'Pet Factor' competition run by NOAH

THE National Office of Animal Health is running a competition via its consumer website, [www.pethealthinfo.org.uk](http://www.pethealthinfo.org.uk), to find an animal with "the Pet Factor". NOAH is inviting owners, vets and vet nurses to go onto the website and put forward nominations, in no more than 200 words, of animals that have staged an amazing recovery, shown exceptional bravery or set themselves apart in some other way.

The closing date for entries is 28th February (2010).

The winning pet and its owner will receive a photo shoot worth over £1,000 with renowned animal photographer Sam Lunt.

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