

How to hat a CF and get warm for a Bang

1. Intro
2. Education
3. Associations - see NX vidéos
4. Social, language and vocab
5. Arriving at Centrale
6. Paris and travelling - Beauvais or not to Beauvais?
7. Healthcare, banks, financial
8. Lessons and choices
9. Project
10. During the year - changing room etc.

1. Intro

None of us were really sure what to expect when arriving at Centrale. Would the courses be harder than Cambridge (if that's possible)? Would the other people be friendly? How much will it all cost? How good does my French need to be? How many forms do I need to fill in before I buy a baguette?

We've put this guide together to help answer a few of those questions. Give you some more information before applying to Centrale, and give you a good general idea of what life at Centrale is really like.

You'll be going into the second year of a three year course at Ecole Centrale.

2. Education

French Higher Education System

Ecole Centrale Paris or "Centrale" as it is referred to, is not in fact a university. It is what is known as a "Grande Ecole". Centrale is not big at all though, it's tiny compared to Cambridge, with just 500 people per year in the 3 years worth of students that make up the undergraduate cohort. Grande Ecoles are viewed as better than universities when it comes to engineering higher education in France.

The admission system for getting into Centrale is very different compared to that of Cambridge. No A-levels, no interviews and no personal statements. Instead most students at Centrale spend two years after passing their college exams at the age of 17-18 preparing for “concours” at special colleges that are referred to as “prepa”. “Concours” aren’t like A-Levels, or any other exam used in university admissions. They are literally “races”. After taking these concours, students are ranked according to their score. The students with the highest grades get to pick la creme de la creme of France’s Grand Ecoles.

This means students are picked solely on their ability to do really well in exams in a narrow set of subjects. Prepa is reportedly not that nice! Students spend all day every day for two years studying difficult maths physics and chemistry for daunting exams at the end of their two years, where only the best will make it through. All this means that when French prepa students arrive at Centrale, they’re ready to let their hair down a bit.

Another entrance point to centrale is through the “Fac” which basically means University. Students coming in through this route spend three years at University then apply to come to Centrale. Only around 10% of students come to Centrale through this stream.

Exams at Centrale

When students arrive at Centrale, they still get marked in exams, but they’re not classed at the end of their time there. There are no 2:1s or 1sts, just a diploma from Centrale regardless of your exam grades (as long as you pass).

Students in the first year follow a common trunk of courses, with very little choice in modules, a bit like the first two years at Cambridge. All students at Centrale have to do some sort of exchange, whether that be working abroad during the summer, studying abroad for a semester, or even taking a semester off to work abroad. To go on good exchanges, first year students need good grades during their first year, so you’ll see them working fairly hard.

In second year students only need to pass (which isn’t as easy as it sounds). Third year exam results are used to select the best candidates by employers.

Teaching

In my experience the teaching during second year at Centrale wasn’t as good as at Cambridge. Instead of three to one supervisions there are example classes with a class of around thirty people. A lot of students don’t ask questions about the topics, and the people giving these classes are usually very experienced, so it is still possible to get all the questions you want answering answered. These example classes go over a set of questions in class, that you will have been given at the start of the class. This means that you don’t necessarily have the time to work through the question in detail, it also means it is quite easy to cruise through the class without fully understanding what is going on.

Lectures are usually timetabled in three hour slots for one subject in classes of around 30 students, with an hour and a half of material being taught, then a 15 minute break, then an hour and a half of example classes. I found this pretty full on and preferred the more broken up timetable structure at Cambridge.

There are very few, to no labs, depending on which electives you take. If you do CAD as part of your course it will be more than likely that you have to do it on your own computer, something worth bearing in mind if you were thinking of getting a new laptop. I used a Chromebook and had to install Linux on it which wasn't great.

3. Associations

Being in student societies, or associations, will be a major part of your life at Centrale. The largest societies effectively run the residence and almost all events that happen at the university, from the careers fair (Forum) to the Year Ball (Gala de Promotion), speakers events (Symposium) and the world's biggest student rugby 7s tournament (Centrale7). You also may find that you're known around campus for your associations, and that your floor is based around one.

You'll receive a guide at the start of the year with a little aspect of most associations, but this really doesn't show all they have to offer. Contact us on facebook for example and we'll try and get you access to the site of NX, the student television network which is so much more than it sounds. They have live screenings which attract most of the campus and include sketches and challenges, and they cover most of the major events on campus, along with the photography society, Centrale Num.

A big focus of Centrale associations is on putting on events or providing services for the rest of the students on campus, there is a real engaging aspect to this. Events that we've most enjoyed include the WEI (Integration Weekend at the start of September, in a mystery location), the NdT (Nuit des Troubadours, a kind of music festival with lots of fire), Equinox (a classy soirée in Paris known for its DJs), the RAID (an ironman), the Bdl/BdE trip abroad, Centrale7, the BdE campaign week (people doing anything to get elected), the Pistus (ski trip)...

4. Social, language and vocab

BdE = Bureau des élèves, the link between the university and the students + more

AdR = Association de résidents, link between the residence and students + more

Bdl = Bureau des Internationals, organise the integration of internationals + more

BatEns = Teaching building

BALs = Boite aux lettres = pigeon holes

5. Travel in Paris

Mike regrets not buying the Navigo pass at the start of the year - being a student helps you get a good discount. Make an estimate as to whether it is worth it to you, but as a guide any more than two trips per week into Paris will make it pay for itself, not least for the fact that you can then freely take the 379 to/from La Croix de Berny, which is only an 8 minute walk but feels longer in the winter! You'll see lots of people get on without paying or swiping, the fine is around 50euros if caught, though we've never seen this happen, and the packs of 10 t+ tickets (14euros) also work on the buses if you're more law abiding.

If you decide against the navigo, it's best to buy two bundles of 10 RER tickets, one for into Paris and one back again, making each single trip 2,20 euros. But at the weekends and jours feriés (which, unlike at Cambridge, exist at Centrale) a ticket jeune for 3,85 will cover all transport into and around Paris for the day and is well worth it. La Croix de Berny is slightly closer than Antony but Antony has more things, like shops and a market; there's also the very rich town of Sceaux if you cross the park. Antony is the stop before La Croix de Berny, which means that at rush hour Antony is often a better bet since you're more likely to get a seat or actually get on the train!

6. Travelling to/from Paris

Plane

There are three airports which claim to serve Paris, Charles de Gaulle (=Roissy), Orly and Beauvais. Getting to/from Centrale from each is a bit different.

Orly: This is the closest airport. You can take the Orlyval, a shuttle train (9-10euros) which drops you at Antony, from where you can take the bus or walk to Centrale. Alternatively you can ask a friend to pick you up, take an UberPool for about 13 euros or use a single 1,40 t+ ticket to take Tramway T7 then the Tvm to La Croix de Berny and the 379 to Centrale.

Charles de Gaulle: Without a very kind friend or massive taxi budget you'll need to pay for the 10euro special fare into Paris on RER B, though you stay on this line through to La Croix de Berny. Navigo passes also cover this but the ticket jeune doesn't.

Finally Beauvais, which has about as much claim to being in Paris as it does to being in England. Ryanair offers some great deals from here, but it's worth bearing in mind that you need to leave Centrale at least 4 hours before your flight to take the RER and metro to Porte Maillot, from where the shuttle bus (16 euros each way if bought online) leaves 3 hours before your flight time. Alex managed to get a 15 euro flight to the south of Spain from this airport!

Train

The eurostar to Gare du Nord is the smooth and easy, and you can basically bring what you like on it and plenty of luggage, but is expensive except booked a month or more in advance. From Gare du Nord - RER B to La Croix de Berny.

To/from elsewhere in France you really need to book the train well in advance or prices get ridiculous, especially for the TGV, but you can get quickly around France. If you're going to make a couple of trips a carte jeune (50euros) gets you at least a third off all fares.

Bus

Alex is the expert here, Mike can't handle buses. It takes around 8 hours from London and more from further afield, but can cost very little even a few days beforehand (£7 or so). You can also get around France and Europe cheaply - try comparabus.com

7. Banks and Healthcare

Banks

We're not supposed to tell you this, but hopefully it'll help you make an informed decision. In the first week several banks will come to Centrale and offer for you to sign up. You'll be persuaded by people at Centrale that if you sign up for all 3 you'll get some kind of discount, possibly for the WEI weekend. However, it's for you to find out whether that's actually the case by seeing if you can pay the same amount for the WEI without having signed up to all three banks (tell them you have if you like), and whether infact it is only one bank involved in this deal (Société Générale?), or none at all.

Each of the banks offers goodies and things like 'free' loans and all sorts of insurance. You may also find that during the year having a cheque book with a particular bank gives you discounts on activities as the associations have a deal with that particular bank (for us there was 20 euros off the Pistus Ski trip with an LCL check). However the pain of trying to deal with all these accounts may not be worth it.

Despite discounts offered, as a recommendation only sign up for one bank as there are bloody difficult to close (you need to make your account to zero online then write a letter which you physically hand in at a branch, any other method risks not working. Even then this isn't foolproof). You may also find they all charge you for things you didn't realise you'd signed up for, or that they have given you a loan you weren't expecting.

From your bank you want a cheque book (France is still in love with them) and a debit card, and online access to your account, expect to wait three weeks for these to arrive. You may also want to check the amount you can withdraw per month as some accounts are very limited. Ask for a RIB as soon as you can aswell so you can transfer in money. We used transferwise.com as the fees are much lower than for normal bank transfers. It's better to stay above 0 if possible as it's technically illegal otherwise in France, but we don't know who's actually going to notice as long as you pay it back eventually.

You need to close your bank account at the end of the exchange or you will keep getting charged to keep it open. An exception to this is a Boursorama account which is an online bank account. Alex opened this bank account and has kept it as a cheap and easy way of paying for things abroad.

Another option instead of a French bank are the special credit cards, like one at Halifax which gives good rates on euro withdrawals.

Health Insurance

Health Insurance in France is covered by a combination of Sécurité Sociale and a Mutuelle. If you have an EHIC card this in theory covers you for Sécurité sociale (otherwise about 220 euros) and should get you 70% of most medical costs refunded, you can then buy a Mutuelle which tops you up with what isn't covered.

If you don't have a Securite Sociale number, you CAN'T get the mutual part of insurance, despite what the nice sales assistant tells you!

Here we don't know what to suggest. All we know is that is complicated if you ever actually need to make a claim, as most of us have tried and none so far has received any money, despite signing up for LMDE and having an EHIC. The service SGAE on the 3rd floor of the BatEns is useful but they can only work within the system.

If it's possible to get insurance in your home country that covers you in France that's an idea, or possibly some sort of Year Abroad cover (but none of us have used that so check it out carefully).

Assurance Responsabilité Civile

This is a legal requirement and you should get it somehow, though a bank or through LMDE, we got it for about 20 euros with LMDE.

CAF

The CAF is a fund that we wish we'd known more about earlier on. You can claim around 200 euros a month refunded on your rent. There is a poster about it near the Financial Office for the Residence. The important thing is to start the ball rolling early, as you will receive funds from the date you send in your documents, it won't be backdated. They are notoriously slow and painful but the reward may be worth it. The office is in Antony, though check online what times you're allowed to visit.