Marseille - A beautiful port city
Thanks to ERASMUS+, I had the chance to do an internship at the Aix-Marseille University, in Marseille, France from January to April 2018.

Marseille is the second most populated city of France. It is France’s largest port city located in south, the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region along the Mediterranean coast. Marseille is one of the oldest cities in Europe founded by the Greeks and has been an important trading centre and main commercial port. Due to its geographical location, Marseille has a Mediterranean climate and is the sunniest city of France! The sky is always clear and blue. As a person living in Munich for years, I have to say this is my favourite part about Marseille!

The city has around one million inhabitants and they are of varying ethnic backgrounds, such as African, whose ancestors moved to Marseille since long time ago when many African countries were still French colonies; and also Italians and Spanish, who immigrated to the area after the second world war. Therefore the city is a melting pot of different cultures, and you can see different kinds of people and neighbourhoods.
The city centre of Marseille is called Vieux-Port (old harbour) and here is where the most interesting things happen. Every morning, fishermen sell their stock by auction and you could get freshest seafood (Although I was never able to get up that early to witness that myself). In the day time, there are cruises going to different islands nearby, such as the famous island of If, where the Château d’If (a castle later turned into a prison) is located. And then in the evening, there are a lot of restaurants where you could indulge yourself with some bouillabaisse, while admiring the night view of Notre Dame de la Garde; or just visit some pubs and dance and sing with the locals.

Marseille is of course more than that. You could reach a number of neighbourhoods with totally different vibes with just a 15-minute walk from the vieux port. For example the Panier, with an artistic ambiance and a lot of outdoor cafes; Cours Julien, with creative and colorful graffiti everywhere and also where good restaurants are located; and Noailles, a fresh market where you could find everything, from seafood to savon de Marseille (soap).
Working at Aix-Marseille University

My internship took place at one of the campuses of the Aix-Marseille University (AMU), which is located in the southern part of Marseille. It is very close to the Calanque National Park, where you could find many calanques (big cliffs along the coast of Mediterranean Sea). Our team once had a hike there and the view was truly amazing!

I worked mainly at the Computational Biology Group, and each person in the team works on different projects of computation analysis of biology data. My project involved the analysis of RNA sequencing data, from which we could understand the expression of genes under different conditions, such as diseases like cancer. Some of the data came from animal models, like mouse or fly, which we obtained from our collaborating groups; whereas the human data could be obtained from public databases. I learnt to use some computer program packages to analyse the data. At the end I have incorporated the data into a visualisation tool that I have been developing and we are planning to get the tool published along with the data.
One thing I liked about working in this group is that, although each of us were working on different projects, we all got our chances to talk about our own projects during the group meeting that happened every two weeks. With that we could often receive constructive feedbacks from other team members to improve our work. We could at the same time learnt about others’ projects and gain insights from them. My supervisor and teammates are all very knowledgable and nice persons, and they are always willing to share with me their thoughts about my project, and teach me what I need to know.

There were also a lot of interesting talks at the campus every week. The institute sometimes invites external speakers and I really learnt a lot outside my own field from these talks.

The visualisation tool I have been working on. We are going to publish that soon. Stay tuned!
Living in Marseille

Learning French
To live in Marseille, you have to speak French. The people in Marseille in general do not speak English (apart from the ones who work in restaurants or shops in the city center). Therefore every week I went to a language learning group “cafe des langues” (Cafe of languages). I have to admit I still could not speak French fluently now, but I learnt enough to deal with daily situations, like shopping at the supermarket, and even managed to have simple conversations with locals while waiting buses!

Marseille Gourmet
One of the very famous dishes originating from Marseille is Bouillabaisse. It is a fish soup using garlic, onion, olive oil and different kinds of fish as the soup base. The recipes vary from restaurant to restaurant. They could sometimes be pricey as a lot of seafood is needed to cook just a few servings. I tried a couple of restaurant, and finally managed to find one that serves really good bouillabaisse!

Travelling around
Marseille has a relatively convenient public transport system (when the drivers are not on strike and when it is not snowing) with two metro lines, three tram lines, and a dozen of bus lines. But I personally like to ride the bike, as Marseille has a very good bike hiring system, which you could rent and return your bike at any of those stations. It is nice way to discover Marseille, especially when travelling along the coast!
Admire the world’s longest bench (2km!) in Marseille along the coast.
The bench of “Corniche J.F. Kennedy”

The dark side of Marseille
There is something about Marseille that the travel guides will never tell you. Marseille has the highest crime rate among all French cities. It has the name of “Mafia town” as many of the crimes are committed by a set of criminal group called “Corsican Mafia”. Marseille for them is a hub for drug trafficking, due to the fact that the port city has links to North Africa and Morocco. The government is also said to be quite corrupted (The Netflix TV series “Marseille” could tell you a little bit of it) and it does not seem to be able (or care) to have control over these crimes.

That being said, it is fairly safe in the city (unless you want to have some adventure in the northern neighbourhood which I do not recommend!), so you are not going to see some exciting scenes of Mafia shooting each other. Though pickpockets are quite often and one must be very cautious with valuables.
Marseille and more!

Marseille, being the second largest city in France, is well connected with other cities with an extensive train network. You could reach Paris in just 3.5 hour with TGV!

TGV from Marseille to Paris, ~770km, 3.5 hours) (FYI: DB from Munich to Berlin, ~580km, 4.5 hours)

So I decided to make good use of some of my holidays and weekends to visit nearby cities of Marseille (and Paris, of course). Aix-en-Provence is just half an hour by train from Marseille but has a totally different vibe. It’s the home of the famous painter Cezanne. You could find the footsteps of the painter everywhere. It is definitely a nice town to go for a relaxing afternoon; Lyon is another city that I love a lot. It is a historical city founded by the Romans 2000 years ago. The historical sites are well-preserved and each of them has a lots of stories to tell!

Lyon, a river city, located at the confluence of the Saône and Rhône rivers

Overall, I would say the internship was a wonderful experience. Not only I have learnt a lot from the lab, but also from a lot of interesting people, each with different background and culture. Marseille is definitely amazing and everyone should pay a visit to experience this lovely city himself or herself!