Over the summer of 2012 myself and 2 other Queen Mary students undertook a visit to Europe. The purpose of this trip was to gain greater knowledge of other cultures and develop a breath of knowledge around our subjects. The main aim of my trip was to gain first hand experience of the effects of different cultures upon various places and people resident within countries located in Europe. I chose this topic, as being a human geography student the concept of culture is a central theme running though out all my modules.

Having undertaken this trip I can say it has broaden my horizons enabling me to gain a greater understanding of different cultures and provided me with numerous opportunities to interact with different nationalities. To give an example of this I visited a cathedral in Amiens. Here I had an opportunity to talk to local people who had just finished a church service and as a result was offered a guided tour of the cathedral. Upon reflection later on I realised how central the building and the catholic religion was to their lives. We discussed how they viewed church as a community activity, social event and an opportunity to meet with family and friends. Another aspect that resonated with me was how the congregation was made up of a broad range of ages. Showing the religion in broad terms in France appears to more engrain in family life and the church seems too more successful at retaining the young. I also discovered how their working day differed that the UK with breaks for religion and visiting the cathedral were built in. For example a break in the middle of the day where they had the opportunity to visit the cathedral. If I take a more simple of example of cultural differences I could relate to an experience at a meal in Paris. Here it was very common for people in the restaurant to ordering a dish of uncooked mince beef. This is direct conflict to people eating habits in the UK. I am afraid to say that personally I didn't have the stomach to try it but I tried where possible and my stomach would allow it to eat dishes that related to the local culture. One thing I also learnt was how direct translations of the menu can be in fact be misleading. In Salieu we visited a restaurant believing it to be a desert bar as it was advertising crepes that are usually marketed in the UK as a desert. Upon looking at the menu we could see that crepes their were in fact served as a main course along side meat and vegetables.

I not only wished to gain an insight into how European attitudes are different than those in the UK but how their sense of traditionalism and history is displayed in different countries and areas. I looked at how this was reflected in the built environment, visiting points the locals regard as having significant cultural interest and through general dialect and conversation with the locals in the different countries and regions I visited. To pick one place to talk about how history is displayed in the built environment is difficult but on balance I have to talk about Paris. Here I was fortunate to see the Arc de triumph, Palace of Versailles and go up the Ifel tower. Going up the Eifel tower was a goal I had before visiting Paris and although the queue to the top lasted several hours as my luck meant I picked the day when two lifts were broken to get to the top it was well worth the wait. The views from the top were
spectacular you got full panoramic views of the capital city. You could see the contrast in the buildings. From ones built centuries ago to the ultra new financial and business centers that cut through the landscape. It was a truly remarkable experience and I am afraid to admit I believe you got a better view here than on the London eye. The extensive queues also provide another useful opportunity, to chat to other tourist sightseers. We got chatting to an American family and a German family who were coincidently staying at the same campsite we stopped in. It was interesting to listen to their views on the Paris, France and Europe. We stayed at a campsite located in the suburbs or Paris about a 20-minute commute in on the train. This meant that we engaged in the French underground system to gain access to the city. Although being daunting at first we soon found our way round and there were plenty of helpful people happy to help slight lost tourists. To describe and sum up the palace of Versailles is a very difficult task. A building that was designed and expanded by King Louis XV and not finally completed to its current standing in 1985. Rather interesting the gardens are designed in an English fashion, which was popular in the 18th century. I have seen similar garden styles at country houses located in the UK and it had a very similar design to Chatsworth country house's formal garden section. The building now primarily used as tourist destination provided me with a clear and unique insight in to France's past history. Notably the palace also provided me with a lot of additional knowledge about the French revolution. The Arc De Triomphie located on the Place Charles de Gaulle, the largest road junction in France. Seemed architecturally very beautiful however to me slightly out of place. Their was an historic monument surrounded by the mayhem of traffic travelling in all directions. This complemented with the racket of engines and the smell of fumes to me present a slightly strange experience to admiring such an ancient monument. However admits the madness it is in fact a sobering place. You can see names of those who died in the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars, but you also find out that beneath it lays the vault of an unknown soldier from World War 1. It provides a true reminder of the sacrifices people have made.

The benefits of this trip have be huge in terms of personal development with me as an individual improving in confidence and developing my cultural knowledge and experiences within the world. The trip has also helped me grow my knowledge of Europe and areas that are a key interest of mine. It also provided me with a greater world view point on other cultures and ways of living. This was interesting to contrast to my previous UK perspective.

Thomas Voice