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One bright spring evening, I flew out of Sydney bound for adventure in Paris. A tear escaped and rolled down my cheek as I watched the Blue Mountains unfold and disappear beneath me as the plane forged westward. I was leaving my beautiful, wild home for a romantic *séjour à Paris*. This was so unlike me and I really wasn't at all sure about what I was doing. All I knew was, that at the bottom of my heart, this was a *voyage* that I just had to do, if not, I'd regret it all my life. So, trying to be brave, I took a sip of champagne, dried my eyes and tried to think positively.

My story actually began the year before when I met David, a French guy in my postgraduate marketing class. Despite my better judgement or perhaps bound by his French charm he became my boyfriend. We never really talked about a future until, at the end of his MBA, Daviid (as my friends called him) could no longer resist his homesickness. He decided to go back home to Paris and surprise his Dad on his birthday. However before leaving, he thoughtfully asked me if I would like to come with him. I had not done the prerequisite trip to Europe after finishing Uni and thought it would be *SO* romantic to take a year off work, live in Paris and learn French. I left my job, packed up a few essentials and enrolled myself at the Sorbonne (of course). The first place where my scrumptious Daviid and I lived (god knows how) was a tiny 18m² studio, on the 6th floor of a majestic Haussmann-style building, right next to the *Arc de Triomphe*! Our apartment had a to-die-for view of rooftops and balconies adorned with geraniums. It was the end of summer and Daviid hadn't yet started working so we filled our days with all the wonders of being in the cultural centre of Europe. I couldn't have been happier. Each day I discovered something new, strolling through magnificent avenues and quaint, tiny streets. Even grocery shopping became a marvel, the local market seemed to explode with an amazing choice of fruits, veggies, breads, cakes and meats, some of which I recognised and others I still don't quite what to do with.

However, this life of utopia would not continue indefinitely and the 'holiday' came to an end with the arrival of grey skies and shorter days and the beginning of my French classes.

I was in fact looking forward to getting stuck into some work again and more importantly learning French. I was having a hard time communicating and so the sooner I got up to speed the better. So I thought. My first taste of *real* French life came with my first French class at the Sorbonne. Classes started at 8.30 sharp, which

meant getting up in what seemed to be the middle of the night and battle the throngs of grim, sour-faced Parisians to get to the Sorbonne. Once arrived in my classroom I looked around my fellow classmates. The class consisted of a healthy mix of 18 yr olds fresh-out-of-school having been sent to Paris ‘to improve their French’, the ubiquitous Asian crowd huddled in the first two rows and otherwise there was a spattering of 30- 40-somethings who were mostly expatriate wives. The *Professeur* arrived, sat carefully at his desk and calmly began to call the roll. Comfortable that everyone was accounted for, he asked us to take out a clean piece of paper, with a ruler, rule a straight, red line (exactly) 2.5cm down the left hand side of the page. I followed his instructions, whilst thinking that surely this must be a joke and that he would soon lighten up. He then instructed us to mark on the centre of first line *Dictée*. (Dictation). I knew now that this was not the sort of adult education I was used to, I had been flung back into primary school. On arriving home that night, I described this to David, who replied, ‘That is normal, your teacher doesn’t have to be friendly, he is there to teach you.’ I agreed but argued that he could at least treat us as adults. David explained that the teacher must put a distance between himself and his students in order to gain respect and credibility to be able to teach properly. Throughout the course our *Professeur* never did lighten up and in fact even became more furious with us massacring the French language. During classes there was no discussion, no questions just the sound of frantic scribbling as we struggled to keep up with the complexities of French tenses and pronouns. I often thought back to my uni days where, as students, we were left mostly up to our own devices. Our teachers seemed more our equals and it was our responsibility to learn or not. I felt somewhat affronted by this forced handholding. I was only to realise a long while afterwards how important this early training would be for me. The French school system is run like an army and forms the roots of the hierarchical structure of French society. Teachers are your senior, must be obeyed at all costs and never questioned, not surprisingly, doctors, managing directors and other pillars of society expect the same treatment. What the boss says (or does) goes.

Despite our daunting *Professeur*, I quite enjoyed being a student again. I had coffees in cafés in the *Quartier Latin*, went to the library to ‘study’ with my new friends and was home in time for dinner! My French improved bit by painstaking bit. However, I was aware that I was still very cocooned and more like a tourist in Paris and not really mixing with French people, as I would have liked (other than with David’s family, who made huge efforts to listen to and correct my broken French). Most afternoons I was alone wandering about Paris and longed for company. When the weekends came around I jumped at the opportunity to go out with David’s friends. They seemed to be a lot of fun, if only I could follow what they were saying! ‘If I

could just break this language barrier, I would fit in!’ My memories of those evenings are a blur of unintelligible conversations in smoky restaurants followed by sobbing sessions on the way home. Some nights I would pass completely unnoticed. Except of course when saying hello and good-bye!! A French quirk that requires a peck on each cheek for every one in the room when you arrive and again on parting. I actually find this quite charming and best of all it was a moment that I could guarantee that my presence was acknowledged! Despite my efforts, I became disheartened and began to think (unjustly) that David’s friends were unwelcoming, inconsiderate and a tough bunch to crack! Years later, one of these friends actually congratulated me on having found my place in the group. I was extremely touched by this uncharacteristic frankness and realised that I had been wrong all along. I had not only found my place but had won their friendship for life. In Australia, we are open and welcoming to people of all ‘places and creeds’, however we are quick to let a friendship fall away. Parisians, don’t open up to just anyone, one might think that they are reserved or arrogant. One of my French friends described making friends as a game. Each party opens up little by little and at each stage is respectively judged as being ‘friend material’ or not. If at one stage, there is a clash, the relationship stops there, however, if all goes well, a friendship develops. This may explain why French friendships can take years of shared experiences to build.

The battle to get along with David’s friends and family continued and surprisingly the ‘time to go back home’ never actually came. David and I decided to get married and make our lives in Paris. (For the foreseeable future in any case). I finished my Sorbonne diploma so was sure now that I would find a job relatively easily and was looking forward to organising our wonderfully *romantic* (as far as I was concerned) Paris wedding. Back again on my dream cloud, I threw myself into looking for a job and our wedding preparations. Fantastic, everything seemed to be working out, I thought. There are so many opportunities here, particularly as I now considered myself as bilingual / bicultural (which I definitely was not). I would find an international marketing role, just what I’ve always wanted, no worries. Reality bites... I was in a catch 22 situation, I did not have the right to work in France and no self-respecting company was going to fight the horrific French administration to obtain a working visa but without a job lined up I would not be able to apply for a visa. Unless I was married. I was *not* going to get married just for a visa, I would persist.

To add insult to injury, no one here seemed to be impressed by my C.V. As far as they were concerned I was an Australian with an obviously dubious education and equally irrelevant experience!! What do they know about *marketing* in *Australia*? ‘Master of Management, is that equivalent to an American business degree?’, one

interviewer asked. 'University of NSW, what sort of school is that?', asked another. A few months later, two wonderful, acceptance letters came to adorn my 'looking for work' folder, filled to the brim with polite rejection letters. Yippee, I knew I'd get there. Of the two, I chose a position in the international marketing department of a French cosmetics company. I was so proud to work for a French company. I would now really be able to integrate into French society. I was excited about working with French colleagues and not with English or American expatriates in the big Anglo-Saxon companies. The job would be a challenge as I didn't know much about cosmetics but then I love a good challenge, I'd come all this way after all. Once again my enthusiasm was short lived. Obtaining my working papers was nothing short of a nightmare. In short, months of paper chases were followed by months of waiting, after which I was sent back to Australia when the said visa was unceremoniously rejected (too many non EU nationals had been hired recently). I now understood why so few companies were prepared to take on the French administration in order to hire a non EU national. Finally, and in fact luckily, I obtained a tourist visa just in time to get back to Paris for our wedding. Once married, I could at last settle down with the man I loved, pick up the pieces of my tattered career and immerse myself in French society.

For me, living in Paris was (and sometimes still is) a seesaw ride from being elated with wonder to tearing my hair out with frustration. Some days I would sob 'I hate this place' and others I would be jumping for joy. Wherever I looked there just didn't seem to be any order whatsoever. Everyone seems to operate by some sort of secret code. Instead of explaining to me how things operated, I seemed to be left to fall into trap after trap. I made the mistake of taking each slap in the face as a personal attack and slowly spiralled downwards. I had hit rock bottom. Somehow I realised that I had been bashing my head against a brick wall. I no longer had a language barrier but I had a huge cultural barrier. I had to start acting less like an Aussie and more like a French person. But what is *French* and what is *Australian*?

I started off with the easy stuff, where I was frustrated by the lack of queues and organisation I started taking advantage and pushing my way in too. I forgot about turning up on time, I negotiated little deals at the market and tried bending rules wherever I could. I prepared myself for dinner parties with an opinion on at least one current affair or film. Read *Voici* (a trashy 'celebrity news' magazine) to make sure I knew what the stars were up to. Most importantly, I stopped trying to force myself into participating in conversations but instead listened. I really listened to try to absorb that code that separates us so much. One night, I spent the entire night with a huge smile plastered on my face and made one funny joke half way through the night. On the way home, David said that I was magnificent and that I had been much more

‘present’. As far as I was concerned, I had been far from being present but I had given the image that I was following, even if I had been struggling.

Recently, I was at our local swimming pool. I arrived and was amazed to find that there were no lane markers. Kids were mucking around. A couple of older ladies were gingerly doing their therapeutic ‘lengths’ (cross-ways across the pool) whilst a couple of young girls zigzagged their way up and back, chatting as they went. In the midst of this mayhem I was trying to swim lengths (longwise). At one point, I came up spluttering and burst out laughing, thinking how funny this all was. Here I was, trying to swim up the left hand side and back on the right, as I would have done in Australia, desperately hoping that people would work out what I was doing and either stay out of my way or follow me! However no! Complete chaos! I stopped myself and looked around and realised that this was just typically French. Total chaos and an apparent lack of organisation. In fact there were ‘unwritten rules’ - I just had to ask. No one was going to undertake the uncomfortable task of telling me. Instead they glared at me, obviously thinking how inconsiderate I was being. I found out later that the ‘public’ hours are open to all and sundry and you can do what you like as long as you don’t drown or injure anyone. I should have weaving in and out of everyone and not so bloody minded. French society is full of unwritten rules, some of which must be obeyed and others are to be bent. Often people believe that as long as they are not hurting anyone they can do as they like. Some even go to lengths to contradict the police! Unfortunately this works more often for attractive females than for the average French bloke. One morning in my local market I overheard an elegantly dressed man explain this phenomena to his son, ‘There are some rules that can be broken and others not. That is a rule not to be broken!’ I wish I knew which rule he was talking about!! Certainly a stark contrast to our mothers who cried ‘a rule is a rule’.

As children we learn ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’. Wise words when applied to integrating into another society. However in order to do as the Romans do, one must firstly understand what they do and more importantly, understand what we do too! My experience has brought me closer to understanding French culture but also to understanding my own. I have never been more proud to say that I’m Australian and whilst my feet are in France, my heart will always be in Australia.



Originally from Sydney, where she had a 'sensible' career in pharmaceutical marketing. Amy Terdjman has been living in France now for 4 years with her French husband, whom she met in Sydney. She has settled into Parisian life and work in international marketing at Galderma, a French / Swiss owned pharmaceutical company. She is also the Southern Cross Group Coordinator for Paris, helping other Australians interested in coming to France. Her relationship with France began in 1999, when she followed her heart, leaving the security of her Sydney life, her friends and family to start from scratch in Paris. It was a very worthwhile adventure, filled with thrills and spills, and although she often misses her Aussie life, her friends and family, she has made Paris home and now her husband and she are looking forward to the arrival of their first baby in January 2004, another adventure altogether!

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