

MISSING THE PELICANS

Catherine Howse

As I write this I am faced with making a difficult decision: stay in Australia or go back to Europe where I have been living since late 2001.

It was a dazzling holiday romance that stole me away from Perth. En-route to an art course in Florence, Italy, I lost my heart to a charming Swiss man. For a brief, beautiful time the stars shone and the flowers bloomed. Crying as we parted at Zurich airport, I returned home as planned, resolving I must add my lost heart to the list of things one can not claim on travel insurance. But he did not forget me. Several months of deliciously romantic correspondence ensued and I returned to Switzerland, armed an English language teaching qualification – and an optimistic heart

The truth is I was never really ‘in love’ with Switzerland itself. I was only ever passing through. Italy - most definitely yes, Italy is a land of inspired romance and the vigorous pursuit of life. France – yes, again – in a word, ‘Paris’. Who could go to Paris and not fall in love with love? But Switzerland? No, no, not really. Picturesque of course but not exactly the stuff of my travel fantasies. Yet my heart has now entered this mountainous land - and part of it will always remain tucked away in a hilly cobble stoned village called Lausanne.

Living abroad has been one of my most enlightening and formative experiences. But it was not easy. Moving countries requires great resilience. I faced many challenges. A whole life had to be recreated, work found, new friendships forged. Sometimes it was easy, sometimes it was very, very hard. I never got to use my hard-earned teaching qualification. Even though Lausanne was short of native English teachers I couldn’t get a work permit. Australians are not high on the ‘most wanted’ Swiss visa list. No job offer meant no permit and no visa. It was a circular problem. No employer would offer me a job because they knew getting a permit would be nigh impossible. ‘Get married’, they said! It was tough. In three months I would, legally, have to leave the country. What was I to do? I was desperate. It lead me to a job I never thought I would get - a consultancy with a United Nations (UN) organisation in Geneva. Sadly, it was also at this time that the romance died. With mixed feelings I decided to accept it. It was such a wonderful opportunity and it would only be a couple more months. Certainly, at the time, I had a strong urge to curl up into a little tear-stained ball, sneak on a plane and take that gruelling 24-hour flight home - never to return - but somehow I didn’t. I picked up more contracts with

UN agencies and found myself still in Europe 15 months after leaving Perth in search of 'true love'.

Life in Switzerland required an almost physical adjustment. Beautiful as it is Lake Lemman is not the Indian Ocean. I missed the songs of the birds in the morning and the smell of the Eucalyptus trees. During the bleak European winters I pined like a broken lover for the sunshine. But the experience has taught me so much about life. About people, work and culture. It has revealed me to myself. I am happier than ever to call myself Australian, proud to proclaim my heritage for it's graciousness and greatly enriched by experiencing other ways of living.

I don't think you could write honestly about what it is to live outside Australia without disclosing the awful loneliness. Initially, the novelty of being overseas blanks out the lack of friends and family. The experiences are so stimulating. New colours, tastes and smells. New places to discover. New acquaintances. Whole new discourses to explore. But after the newness passes, the lack of close friends becomes an awesome gap to fill. Long empty nights and weekends threaten to stretch out endlessly. There is only so much exciting weekend travel you can do alone. Life is filled with acquaintances. Who will end up being a friend?

Meanwhile, life's crises still have to be dealt with. Can you depend on these new people entering your life? Will they share your joys, understand your quirks and forgive you the way that your old friends do? What space are they coming from? What do you need to learn and understand about their way of life? Intimate friendships take time. And you worry about sustaining friends and family at home. Emailing and phoning can't take the place of personal contact. A friend is diagnosed with cancer, a beloved Grandparent is getting older, your Godchildren are growing up with astonishing rapidity. Your absence has a high price tag.

Do I want to go back? Yes and no. I adore Europe and miss it but nothing heightens your appreciation of what it means to be Australian than to live in a foreign land. I didn't fully understand the meaning of 'culture' until I lived within the confines of another.

One of the most difficult things for me is not being able to fully express myself in French. Forget the 'immersion theory'. After all this time, I am still struggling to conquer it. French-speakers have been known to laugh out loud at my pronunciation but...well, an Aussie never says, 'die'! Sometimes I think I should have the decency to learn a phrase so I can at least apologise in advance for decimating this beautiful language. But criticisms aside, many French-speakers still seem to appreciate my sad attempts to recreate their melodic sounds.

We English monolinguals tend to confound the Swiss. It's hard for them to comprehend that we 'don't speak French?'. It doesn't occur to them that the romantic

languages are not in high demand within our own - *we are 24-hours away from Europe* - borders. It's not that surprising though. The average Swiss citizen has at least three different languages up his or her sleeve. It is not considered astonishing but quite normal. After all they have four officially recognised languages. It goes both ways though - I still find mere bilinguals awesome. Fortunately, the Swiss are also generous about trying to communicate in English, which is not even one of their official languages. Nevertheless you are always fully cognizant of the fact that they hold the advantage - they can say, 'No Madam' several different ways! In *Suisse-Romande* (French-speaking Switzerland) I muddle through with a curious mix of simplified English, a scattering of French and, if I am really scratching, the odd word of Italian picked up from the time I spent in Italy several years before. It's not satisfying though. It's 'survival communications only'. Enough to order coffee the way I like it and understand directions to the nearest public toilet!

It can be frustrating and tiring when confronted with on a daily basis. It makes the simplest of things, like buying the correct bus ticket, a complex negotiation of guesswork and optimism. Combine this with: Can I find the bus stop? Did I catch the right bus? How do I signal, 'stop'? Where the heck do I get off - oh no I missed the stop! Panic setting in about now. Where am I?... and you start to get the picture. It may be fun if you are on holiday but tends to be exhausting when, what are minor things in your own country (and language), are a daily challenge. Intensive French lessons remain high on my action list.

What is 'culture' exactly? Although I made friends with people from all around the globe, meeting other Aussies living in Switzerland was always great. Why? Quite simply, unuttered understanding. The music of an Aussie inflection in the work coffee shop queue was like a light in the cultural wilderness. This surprised me. When I visited Switzerland previously I considered it a very 'easy' country to negotiate. As a traveller, I recall arriving and feeling like I had entered a whole other world. Everything was so well ordered and signposted, finding my way around had been a snap! When I left Australia I wasn't at all worried how I would fit in. But travelling and residing are quite different things. I didn't anticipate the unique cultural differences I actually found.

Despite my deficient French, working in an international organisation based in Geneva guaranteed I met many people who were English mother tongue. However, I quickly discovered that communication is more than being able to use the full range of your language skills. Australians have very peculiar cultural references. It's more than adoring Vegemite and Violet Crumbles or understanding the unique fervour for Aussie Rules. It's what underpins a way of life. It's values. Aussies understand the story of the battler. It's Dick Smith versus Arnotts. It's straight talking and a wry

sense of humour. I found I could pretty much rely on Australians for their warmth, laughter and spontaneity. It made me realise some of the things about a country that shape character and expectations. Australia has an infectious energy. It is spacious and delicious. It is wild and raw and unconquerable. Unfettered by tradition, it is a country at the genesis of blooming. There is an easiness, a sense of fun and possibility that is at once exciting and contagious. Before I left Australia I took the Australian way of life for granted. I lived amongst it. I value and rejoice in the gifts of each country, but now I comprehend more deeply the life I was born to.

My employment offered me another wonderful learning experience. Populated by people from all over the globe the workplace was a melting pot of colour, culture and countries. But some things about the system required an adjustment of expectations. Without realising it, I was in for a bit of a culture shock. Hierarchy not being particularly important to Aussies, I blew in as I was. It floored me to be told I was '*not allowed*' to speak to Directors or - God forbid, beyond - and what was this separation between *General* and *Professional* staff? Things worked differently here and I had failed to label myself. Mix in a myriad of international backgrounds, for example, expectations of women's behaviour, and it's not surprising my apparent 'confidence' was met with mixed reaction. Some people found my typically Australian directness a bit 'in your face' whereas others found it 'natural and refreshing'. It was a bit of a rude awakening, however, I learnt to ameliorate myself. Softly, softly paved the way to acceptance. I was genuinely interested in learning. Embracing differences, proving that I could play with the team and get the job done, seemed to win over the most affronted. It was a rich lesson.

Which brings me back to my decision. Sitting here in the golden Australian sunshine with a fragrant yellow frangipani flowering quietly outside my window, I am so happy to be back in 'God's own country'. After my long absence, the smells are more exquisite, the colours more brilliant, and the breezes as sweet as perfume. Whilst my time in Europe was full of beauty, challenges and experiences that will take many years to fully retell, this is my real home, the place of my birth. Once more, I luxuriate in the divinity of a smoke-free cappuccino zone accompanied by close friends. I rejoice at the smell the Swan River and the excitement of the ocean on a wild winter day. Simple things that I missed now seem extraordinarily special, like watching for the pelicans that survey peak hour traffic from on top of the streetlights and the pods of dolphins, which sometimes play in the river near my home. Without a doubt I love this place with the same intensity of life that it radiates.

And yet, in Europe these past years, my heart also sang and wept and laughed. I saw fairytale castles surrounded by quicksand and traversed snow-covered mountains. I slept beneath the waterline on a frozen sea and watched 100 coloured

hot air balloons float over chocolate box houses in Switzerland. I made wonderful new friends from Ghana to China. How can I choose?

Either way it's difficult. Positions for people with my background are not plentiful in Perth. Despite my qualifications and experience, after four months I am still job-hunting. Employers appear impressed but fearful – *'you're overqualified'*. What is it about working for an international organisation? They seem to think I will quickly disappear to a more senior position – I wish they would tell me where! Employers suggest that I 'go east' where the 'big opportunities' are. To me this defeats the purpose of returning *home*. Is it so difficult to envisage that I might actually want to live in Perth? It is not about money. I could earn a lot more money where I was. I treasure this beautiful little city. I want to put something of what I have learnt back into the community that grew me. After my exciting and hectic work life in Geneva, the possibility of several more months of job-hunting looms dark and dangerous to my psyche. Will the decision be made for me? Will lack of opportunities force me to go back to Switzerland?

Returning to Switzerland won't be easy either. Many of my friends have moved on and finding accommodation in or near Geneva is almost nigh impossible. Life abroad is not all fabulously exciting. The following is a genuine classified advertisement from a UN organisation intranet:

Title: Desperately searching a roof

URGENT.

I am desperately looking to sub-let a studio/apartment in Geneva, Ferney or surrounds, furnished or unfurnished, from NOW and until the 30th of October.

My name is (xxx), I am a Public Health doctor from the UK working at XXX for 6 months, I stayed the first month in a Hotel but could not find any place to rent so now I am living in my car!

Please e-mail me back or phone 022 79x xxxx

Thanks.

Lucky it wasn't winter! My own experience was similar. After splitting with my Swiss boyfriend I was lucky to get a room in a women's-only pension in

Lausanne. I foolishly thought it would be temporary but ended up staying there for the duration. I was a 30-something woman living in a shoebox-sized attic above a railway line, which shook when the trains rumbled by. (At first I used to dream it was an earthquake however, I did get used to it). The shared facilities: a dark bathroom with dangerous surges of hot and cold water and problematic drainage; a dingy 'fully-equipped' kitchen (two pots and a blunt knife!); the constant fire hazard posed by an eccentric resident who thought nothing of leaving her pots to boil dry every other night; the theft of my food from the communal fridge and the fact there was no capacity to install a private telephone... started to get a bit much. It's true that eventually, I could scale the 100 plus steps to my fourth floor room (no lift), carrying bags of groceries without panting but it was hardly glamorous. The ladies who ran it were wonderful people and my backside has never been in better shape but I dread the thought of doing it again. Not forgetting commuting an hour and half each way to Geneva...well there is a difference between living and 'existing'. We are so lucky in Australia.

Of course living in Switzerland has its compensations. There isn't a corner in this jewel of a country that isn't beautiful. I have come to love the mountains like a native. There's amazing work with a global perspective, exposure to a fantastic array of art, heritage and the music of foreign languages. There are a few people to call on for company now and I've discovered new favourite foods. In Suisse Romande they make a wonderful *café au lait* (known locally as 'renversé') and *pain au chocolat* (or 'chocolate croissant'), which defies anything I've tasted in Australia. Of course there is no replacing Vegemite but my Father is now primed and ready to fly over emergency rations. And my sister was really on to something when she sent me a Christmas subscription to the *Australian Women's Weekly*. The rewards are weekend visits to my Australian friends in Paris who live near the Eiffel Tower (three hours on the *Lyria* high speed train), a thermal bath atop a Swiss mountain with my beautiful Swiss girlfriends, a cheap flight to Amsterdam or a day's shopping in Milan... Things which seemed mind-boggling when I lived in Australia.

Time and perhaps luck will make my decision. Funny how your heart can begin to grow in two places. Now I barrack for Australia first and Switzerland second. It's a curious thing. Both good and bad. I am blessed by my familiarity of this other place, but now that my heart has grown some roots there I will always feel a little bit sad. Wherever I may be, in Australia or in Europe, some of my heart is yearning for the life that flowers in the other.



Catherine Howse was born in Perth, Western Australia. She first caught the travel bug as a two year old when her parents took her to the US for a year. It was here that she also briefly gained - and lost - an American accent. Over the years she has regularly travelled overseas and now confounds would be accent pickers with her Aussie-European inflection. Her passions are painting, health and social equity and preservation of the natural environment.

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