

FINDING HOME

Felicity Edge

Ask almost anyone who has spent time in New York what they think of the city, and their eyes will usually light up and they'll launch into an impassioned response. I can almost guarantee you won't get a bland reply, and you'll never get a simple, "It's nice." No, most people have far more to say about their feelings for this "capital of the world", and most seem to react in one of three ways: they loooove New York, are thrilled by the action, the energy, the constant hum of activity, the wealth of cultural, financial, personal opportunities, the potential for anonymity and fame alike; they hate this concrete jungle and all it stands for - pollution, the height of consumerism, waste, decadence and self-indulgence, ceaseless noise, sleepless nights, and, yes, the anonymity that others relish; or they have a tormented kind of love-hate relationship with the place.

I would have to say I fall somewhere in the third category. The ebb and flow of my good and bad feelings towards this place I have made my home for three-and-a-half years has been somewhat unpredictable: days when I am in love with the place could quite easily be followed, unexpectedly, by moments when I have wondered what I'm doing here, why I'm not strolling on the beach at Torquay, sitting in the sun at a Brunswick Street café, or cycling along the waterfront at St. Kilda. But, as my time in New York draws to a close and I prepare my return to Australia and the inevitable challenges that will entail, I find myself more in love with the city than ever. As with many things - jobs, journeys, relationships - they seem sweetest from the end looking back, despite the trials faced along the way.

There are moments when I've wished that someone, somehow, could have forewarned me of one of the greatest challenges - the emotional roller coaster ride I was headed for - when I quit my job, packed up my life in Melbourne, and boarded a plane for the Big Apple. I was destined for a city with which I would soon form a strong bond, a relationship that would have the ability to tug at my emotions, with its ups and downs, in ways only the most intense of friendships can. But not only was living in New York going to set me afloat on a rolling sea of excitements and frustrations - I was also bound for the waves of experiences and emotions that life as an expatriate brings.

I arrived in New York in early April 2000. It was supposed to be spring, but it had snowed the day before and was now windy and bitterly cold. The locals were complaining about the icy weather, but at that point almost nothing would faze me; at

age 26, I was just beginning the biggest adventure of my life. I had travelled overseas previously, and had spent a three-week holiday in New York just six months earlier, but I had never packed up and headed off indefinitely.

I had mixed emotions leaving home. Life in Melbourne was really pretty good: I had a job I enjoyed, I lived in a spacious house with good friends, I had close ties with my family, and an active and interesting social life. Why would I leave all that? For adventure. For something new. For the opportunity to try life on the other side of the world. Australians sometimes suspect that the action is all in the northern hemisphere - there was probably a small part of me that wanted to see what the fuss was all about.

It was sad to leave Australia, not knowing quite what lay ahead, but mostly not knowing when I would next return. Would I feel left out? Lose touch with what was happening with my friends? Have to endure homesickness? Would I run out of money? Would I make new friends in New York? All these questions loomed and seemed both daunting and exciting, but I had no doubt I wanted to experience life Manhattan-style, try to get a job, and stay as long as I could. So, I left home and followed my dreams to the other side of the world.

My landing in the big city was cushioned by my two - and only - New York friends, who kindly met me at the airport. Some people said I was brave to come to the big smoke, but I was not as brave as many people who set out across the world to live in a foreign place, not knowing a soul at their destination, and then proceeding to successfully, happily create new lives for themselves. I at least had two dependable supports waiting for me in New York - one Aussie, an old friend who would understand where I was coming from, one American who knew the place I was headed. Without them I am certain I would never have boarded that plane. They immediately became the beginning of the framework for my new, overseas life.

Whether you move to New York, Tokyo, Prague, or Auckland, I suspect one commonality of the expat experience is the waves of emotion, good and bad, that wash over you from time to time as you go about your life in a new place and contemplate what it means to live outside your home country. On the down side, there is homesickness, loneliness, fear, and vulnerability, powerful feelings and hard for me to shake at the times they struck. In fact, there are moments when they have taken hold so strongly that I have wanted to board the next plane home. But my low times have been well offset by all the highs of living far from all that is familiar and comfortable. As I embarked on my New York experience, I was soon to discover that the smallest of successes - opening a bank account, finding a store where I could buy good bread, learning how to tip appropriately in a bar, giving a cab driver correct directions, negotiating the subway with ease - can bring a far greater sense of

achievement and fulfilment than doing these things in Australia. It follows that larger achievements - receiving job offers, finding somewhere to live - seem more tremendous than ever.

The clock started ticking as soon as I arrived: I was on a three-month tourist visa, and so had no more than ninety days in which to secure a job offer, gather the necessary visa papers, and leave the country to acquire my working visa so I could re-enter and start the new job on an appointed date. It took only a week or so before, through trial and error, I had learned many of the intricacies and complications of visa applications. The whole process could seem alienating and made the prospect of finding a job - and an employer willing to sponsor my visa - more challenging than ever. The additional obstacles that the visa represented made it seem a far cry from job-hunting at home. Fortunately, in this city of opportunity they were obstacles I was able to overcome.

Those first weeks are a whirlwind of memories: there was jetlag to be shaken, job interviews to be scheduled, visa research to be done, and all the while I was sleeping in the living room of my Australian friend's tiny apartment (which I would very quickly discover was the norm for New York, a stark contrast with the spacious abode I had left behind), trying not to feel like a large intrusion and inconvenience in the already cramped space. On top of the larger tasks of finding a means of supporting myself before my savings dwindled and finding a place of my own to live, there were the day-to-day challenges that face all newcomers to a city: finding where to buy good fresh produce; working out where the closest Laundromat is and then what coins are needed for the machines, and the fun (and sometimes frustrating) task of roaming supermarket aisles searching for the items I needed. Self-raising flour, for instance, is not something to be had in New York supermarkets. The simplest aspects of daily life are so important in a new place. Learning what food I could and couldn't buy, and altering the way I cooked, what I ate accordingly, was just one more way I was adjusting to life overseas.

Seeing the most ordinary of daily tasks accomplished in new ways is one of the gems that living overseas offers. Life as an expat is punctuated, even defined, by new experiences and the heightened awareness of what it takes to establish an enjoyable and meaningful life. Living overseas means seeing the world through fresh eyes, learning not to take anything for granted, and being grateful for everything I have. And that includes being grateful to be Australian, grateful for everything I'd left behind.

I spent many hours, many days, walking the streets of New York in those first months, exploring new neighbourhoods, acquainting myself with the ins and outs, getting to know my new friend, the city. And I soon discovered my favourite place in

New York, Central Park, where I went regularly to run the roads and tracks and, more importantly, get a small break, a tiny escape, from the rush of the city that stands guard along its four sides. Some days as I ran or explored the city on foot, it was exhilarating to feel so far away from anything familiar; I was on an adventure and I didn't know where the next street would take me. At other times, I felt lonely in a way I had never felt in Australia, where I had an old and trusted support network and frame on which to hang my life. In New York, there was no readymade frame, apart from my two invaluable friends, and I had a lot of work ahead of me to build something similar here.

Every day in my new city presented new challenges, most of them unexpected. Never in Australia would I have dreamed, for example, that I would have any difficulties making myself understood in another English-speaking country. But, the Australian accent is not universally understood in the United States. I had spoken French while living in France for a few months during university years, and I had travelled to countries where I didn't speak the language, but never before had I experienced the language barrier I was finding in New York - where I was speaking the same language as those people who struggled to understand me. This was a brand new experience for me, and there were times that it was frustrating to order water in a restaurant and receive a blank stare in response. It really didn't seem that difficult a request! But, I was learning that I couldn't expect anything to be as I was accustomed to. I had to have an open mind in my approach to even the most trivial of daily situations. The problem with making my accent understood still sometimes takes me by surprise. I don't fault those people who can't understand - Australian television shows, music, and films just aren't widespread in the United States, which means many people have never had exposure to the idioms, words, and sounds that we consider normal. Perhaps if we hadn't grown up in Australia watching Hollywood movies and U.S. television shows, we might have the same difficulties with American accents. These small surprises and tests for me, the little thought-provoking occurrences, are part of what makes life in a foreign country so rich, part of what I had come for.

Americans might struggle to understand me at times, but as an Australian, I have only ever been welcomed with open arms, my country warmly complimented. Americans are, on the whole, friendly and welcoming. Those I have met and befriended have always made an effort to make me feel at home here. And everyone always has something positive to say about Australia. "I hear it's a beautiful country," "I would love to go there," "Australians are so friendly and laid back." Even, "I just love your accent." If only I could be sure that Americans would receive the same warm treatment they deserve when visiting Australia. Australians might

struggle with what the current U.S. government stands for, with the pre-eminence of American culture throughout the world, with the power this mighty nation yields, with loud American tourists who give the States a bad name, but the fact is, those Americans I have come to call my friends are every bit as warm and deserving of praise and attention as my compatriots.

Becoming accustomed to my surroundings in New York, starting to piece together my new life, I was learning what it meant to live in New York, and what it meant to live as an Australian in New York. And the learning never ceases. New York stops for no one, and there were times - there still are - when I was very aware of being just one drop in the ocean, adrift in a vast sea of people and lives. Coming from Australia, I had no concept of the sheer numbers of people that call New York home. Close-quarters apartment living; crowded, pulsing streets; restaurants where you have to wait in line (or, rather, "on line" as the locals say); pushing and squashing into subway cars; the thousands upon thousands of cars on the roads in and out of the city on a long weekend; the traffic jams; the constant sound of sirens; these were all things beyond my experience, and all somewhat daunting. This is a city where you have to look out for yourself or you'll be trampled by the crowd.

The city presents many challenges as a place to live, but certainly not that of being the only foreigner or newcomer to the place. In fact, the majority of people I have met or befriended in three-and-a-half years are either expats themselves - from Britain, Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, Puerto Rico, Russia, Turkey - or they are from elsewhere in the United States - Seattle, L.A., Washington, D.C., Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, upstate New York. There is something comforting in knowing that among the huge conglomeration of people here, I am not the only one far from home, trying to find my way, attempting to seize the opportunities the city offers. Many others are here for the same reasons, with the same motives, and most are eager to share a good survival tip or two. It's like a club we are all in together, all aware of the value of information such as where to find good, genuine apartment listings, how to go on an easy weekend escape from the city, where to look for job advertisements, how to get a visa. It's a fast paced, cutthroat life such as I'd never experienced in Melbourne. At times I felt like a country bumpkin as I learned the ropes and became accustomed to how things in the city work.

New York is, as the old cliché goes, a huge boiling pot of humanity - people from every corner of the earth, of all ages, sizes, persuasions, and personalities walk side by side on these crowded streets. Melbourne is multicultural if it's anything, but the vast numbers of people and cultures in New York can make Melbourne seem bland in comparison. Every day I hear people speaking Spanish, French, German,

quite often Russian, and more often than not, a language I do not recognise. Every person you meet in New York has a story to tell about where they are from. And on the rare occasion that I've met someone born and bred in the city, that is a fascination in itself. There is abundant opportunity here when it comes to learning about not only the United States, but other parts of the world, and for glimpsing the world through other people's eyes.

It fascinates me, thrills me, that so many people from so many walks of life live side by side in this city and call it home. And although it took some time to get to this point, I do feel as though I belong here now, too. I've learned the ropes, planted my feet on the ground, and found a place for myself. It is almost impossible to discuss the past three years in New York without mentioning the one event that will bind the people of New York together forever: September 11, 2001. That horrific day served to fortify my ties with this city and to make me feel a strong allegiance to it. The part of me that day - those months - that was terrified in a way I had never before been wanted to leave, to return home to Australia to the place I associated with safety and comfort. But the part of me that had begun to think of New York as home made me stay. How could I leave as soon as things got rough? In spite of our ups and downs as I became acquainted with the place, the city had been good to me; it would have been wrong to make hasty decisions and leave behind the opportunities I had here, and all that I'd worked to create.

As much as New York feels like home, though, for a large portion of the year, I am acutely aware that I am not in a familiar environment, that I am in the northern hemisphere. New York's winters have treated me harshly, forcing upon me temperatures colder than I had ever felt before, continuing for weeks, months on end. Australians, even Victorians, are not trained for daily life in temperatures well below zero, for getting to work each day in the snow, for knowing to watch for ice on the sidewalk, for preparing for blizzards. I didn't even own a winter hat when I came to New York - something that quickly changed as soon as the first icy wind of the season tunnelled through the streets and right through me, chilling me to the bone. Every time I get through another winter, it feels like a feat of survival. But the summers - the other extreme of heat and humidity for weeks on end without respite, tropical downpours and thunderstorms, but beautiful balmy summer evenings I adore - have offered forth conditions to appease me for another year, to clear my memory of the brutal winter passed, and lull me into a false belief that the next one won't be as difficult. But still I miss Australian summers: weekends spent at the beach, barbeques every night in the back yard, the sound of the cricket on the television in the background on a hot weekend afternoon. These are all things engrained in my

psyche; sights, sounds, feelings that are a part of where I come from, and therefore a part of who I am.

Space is something else I did not appreciate so much until I left Australia. It did not take me long to discover how spoiled I was to grow up somewhere I have always been surrounded by plenty of space. The houses I have lived in - and there have been many - always had a garden, or at least a large outdoor deck, and Australian cities - the streets, public transport, public spaces - are not so crowded that personal space is such a valuable commodity as it is in New York. So living in a New York-sized apartment has been something of an adjustment, and the confined spaces have led me, along with many other New Yorkers, to spend a large part of my life in the city's backyard, Central Park.

You'll often find me lying under a shady tree there, wandering through The Ramble, or pounding the track around the reservoir when I need to clear my mind, need some revitalising time with an old friend. And just as in my early days in New York when I turned to walking the city's streets for an escape, a release, I still spend hours roaming its fascinating, sometimes beautiful, sometimes depressing, but ever-changing streets when I need some space. These are just some of the things that have become habitual - necessary - parts of my life, new familiarities that have replaced those I left behind in Australia. Moving to New York, I missed the comfort of my home, the people, the places I knew, but three-and-a-half years down the track, I look at my life and see innumerable new places, people, routines that have now become the staples, the small pleasures that bring me those reassuring feelings of familiarity and belonging. That make me feel in control of my life; at home.

So, living in a city where I feel comfortable, a place so vibrant, active, and full of opportunity as New York, how could I yearn for anything else? What could I need that I don't have here? Why would I ever leave? These are some of the questions in the backs of the minds of many people living away from their home country. When, why, how will I return home, what will I do next, and how will it be? If I go back to Australia, how will I fit in again, readjust?

Even as I have made my decision to return - a decision that crept up on me gradually, slowly took hold, and then settled itself contentedly in my mind - and get ready to pack up my life once more, I wonder what it is that pulls me back to Australia, and how the transition back into life there will unfold. I'm going back a different person than when I left. I've had opportunities I would never have encountered there to learn about myself, my limits, my weaknesses and strengths. Through leaving Australia, I have learned what it is about our country that makes me want to return, that makes us a truly "lucky" country - the charmed lifestyle; our

beautiful, often pristine, surroundings; the pace; people's aptitude for enjoying life; our laid back senses of humour.

But I built the new framework and hung my new Manhattan life on it. It has been eighteen months since my last visit to Australia, and New York's streets and neighbourhoods are now the ones that feel familiar, that I look forward to returning to at the end of each workday. This is the place I now have a favourite bookstore, coffee shop, running track, local restaurant, bar, and park. The place I have formed relationships to be treasured, made new and valuable friends, the people who have seen me through the depths of homesickness and the heights of new excitements alike, who know far more about these years of my life than my friends and family in Australia. I have ridden a wave of good fortune in my life away from Australia. And now as I begin, for a second time, to pack up the life I have created, tie up loose ends, bid my farewells, I realise that I am, once again, leaving home. But this time I'm headed for home.



Felicity Edge is originally from Geelong, Victoria. She lived in Melbourne for ten years, studying and working in book publishing, before moving to New York in April, 2000. She lives on the Upper Westside in Manhattan and works as managing editor for an academic publisher. Most members of her large family live in Australia. When she returns to Australia, she will be sad to leave her 843-acre backyard, Central Park.

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