

WHY DID I LOVE PARIS?

Gillian Bridgewater

I fell in love. My affair is over. I am devastated.

How can you fall in love with a city? It's madness, but that's what happened to me in Paris. It worked its charm on me, and I was beguiled.

Three years ago I left Canberra, filled with hazy, romantic ideas about Paris - the city of street cafes, artists, fashion, cuisine, perfume and, of course, the Eiffel Tower. For a reality check, before going, I watched '*Le Journal*' on SBS, went to the *Alliance Française* for French lessons, and listened to the comments of friends about France.

I learned that Paris had some ugly suburbs, my French was not bad, and the streets were covered in dog poo. Friends also told me the French were arrogant and unfriendly, and would not speak English. They advised me to say I was Australian, not British, which I am by birth, as the French hated the English. I am not actually 'English', being of Welsh/Scottish descent, but that's a quibble. I vowed to say I was Australian.

My first impression of Paris re-enforced my romantic notions. There was the narrow cobbled street at the back of our apartment, the leafy boulevard to the front. Within, we had genuine French windows, leading onto narrow balconies with wrought iron balustrades. Many people had window boxes overflowing with bright flowers. Pretty, pretty. Just up the boulevard there was a street market twice a week.

It didn't take long to master the public transport system, with the underground Metro well mapped, and the buses equally so. Every bus stop in Paris has a name, so it is easy to find your way around. Being above ground is much pleasanter and you see more. Soon, I was zapping all over the place.

One thing that frustrated me was that I couldn't find the Eiffel Tower. I would see it in the distance, but somehow, I never got near it. It's a bit like the flagpole on Parliament House. You can see it from all over Canberra and it pops up in the most unexpected places. It was the same with that famous tower. Finally, when some friends from Sydney were visiting, we made a deliberate sortie there. I have to say, when I finally got to it, I found it overwhelming. It is huge. None of the photos you see can do it justice. It is big.

But then, so many things in Paris are huge. Overwhelmingly huge. The *Louvre* is enormous. You get exhausted walking round it. And, what's more, it contains a mind-boggling amount of the world's artistic treasures. Sometimes, I

would just think it was unbelievable to be surrounded by so much priceless material. Not just that, the sumptuousness of the building itself was overwhelming – all that gilt and glitter.

The *Arc de Triomphe* was huge too. We climbed it, so we know. And it's so grand, standing imposingly at the end of the *Champs Élysées*. The traffic hurtling round it is something else that is mind-boggling. So many lanes of it and some twelve streets leading off this giant roundabout. It's called Place Charles de Gaulle, *Étoile*, for good reason, *étoile* meaning 'star'. You can't say you're a seasoned Paris driver unless you've driven round *Étoile*. I never drove in Paris.

So, I started off with the tourist stuff but, as I settled in, I branched out. First, I had to learn French, otherwise how was I to learn about real French things? Also, as a guest in their country, I felt it only polite to learn their language. And it hadn't taken me long to realise there is a vast difference between learning French in class and understanding the real thing. French people speak with a French accent – surprise, surprise - not the English accent of my colleagues back in Canberra. I couldn't understand a word. So, off to the *Alliance Française* I went. In order to be placed in the appropriate class, I had to sit a test. To my chagrin, I was told my French was not good enough even to go into a basic conversation class.

Well, ok. Into the grammar class I went. The teachers were excellent and, to cut a long story short, I progressed to the conversation class. I moved on to do a phonetics course, to improve my pronunciation, and drama course, to act out situations in French. I also two-timed it and attended another, private school, where classes were small and tailored to students needs. Eventually, I had the confidence to ask in shops, at ticket offices or even on the phone for what I wanted.

Meanwhile, I read everything around me. Shop signs, placards, notices, advertisements, all were free ways of learning vocabulary. French and English are so similar, and yet so different, it was great fun. For instance, buses were often *perturbés*. This conjured up a lovely vision of lots of anxious buses rushing round the streets. Or, someone might be looking for their sac, which brought visions of a huge Hessian sack instead of maybe a small handbag.

Eventually, I joined some conversation groups and that was where I made most of my friends. I met wonderful people from all over the world, and at the same time practised my faltering French. There were people from Iran, Taiwan, Spain, Romania, Japan, Canada, Israel, Mexico and of course, the US. I say, of course, because there is a huge population of US citizens living in Paris, as well as the bulk of the tourists being Americans.

As I got to know people, I realised what a rich mixture of stories they brought with them. There was the Canadian who, with her husband, was sailing round the

world. Their boat was moored on the canal by Bastille, while they decided where to head for next. There was an American model, who had lived in France for several years but hadn't had time to learn the language. And the Russian girl, who was always tired in the morning because she'd worked all night, dancing at the Moulin Rouge. And so the story goes on.

I ran into several Australians, from Melbourne and Sydney mainly, but also someone I used to work with here in Canberra, which was unexpected and fun. There was one enterprising lady, who had run her own business in Brisbane. She'd decided she wanted to live in Paris, so sold her business and gone over. She didn't speak French, knew no one and had nowhere to stay. I really admired her guts. She found accommodation, found a job, and got stuck into her new life with a real Aussie spirit.

Although I had a great time with all my newfound friends, what made the experience so French was, of course, the French people themselves. One of the conversation groups I went to was run by three wonderful French ladies, called Michelle, Colette and Denise – such wonderfully French names. They had experienced life as expats themselves and set out to welcome us and introduce us to France and things French. They were an excellent resource if ever anyone had a problem. They also made us speak French. Everyone had a turn, no matter what your level of competence. Michelle would pick a topic from the news and we would have to discuss it. No escape. Sometimes I would hold my breath with horror as she raised something controversial that we in Australia might steer clear of in such mixed company, like the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Or, we might have to explain how things, such as public holidays or education, worked in our own country. This was where I found I didn't know as much about Australia as I thought I did. Explaining our system of voting was quite a challenge. Well, you try explaining that in a foreign language to people who don't go and vote in their own Presidential election and then have massive protests when they don't like the result!

My other conversation group was totally different and we could ramble off in any direction. Sometimes that was fun, sometimes irritating, but always entertaining. One of our number thought himself a ladies' man. He wasn't. We would try to avoid being in a group with him, but the harder we tried, the more we ended up next to him. Then, there was a retired French gentleman, whose elegance and courtesy hinted at a bygone era. He had a wicked sense of humour, saying things with a deadpan expression but with a twinkle in his eye. Another was the gentleman who epitomised the 'French Lover'. I first fell for him when he was playing his guitar at one of our periodic singsongs. He was divine but, alas, not for me.

Apart from the conversation groups, I met people on buses who were friendly, people in shops who were friendly, and I made friends with some of the neighbours in

our apartment block. The *gardien*, who lived with his wife on the floor below us, kept tabs on everything and everyone. He spoke no English but always greeted me heartily and asked how I was. In another apartment lived a mother and her seven-year-old daughter. Fairly early on the mum asked me to help the daughter with her English homework, which I was delighted to do. She was a very bright girl and we got on well. I taught her how to do the tricky *th* sound of English. By way of thanks the mum often invited me in, gave me practice chatting in French, and took me out to show me parts of Paris I would not otherwise have seen. Thanks to her, I went to tea in the gardens by the grand mosque of Paris, and to a Moroccan restaurant with what must be the most fantastic washrooms in Paris. All the walls, including the doors, were lined with mirrors.

Then there was the young couple, with their baby, who were friendly and hospitable. They invited us to the grandparents' house in the country for lunch one day. It was when the hunting season was on and lunch had to be strictly timed to fit in with the hunt. The women were busy in the kitchen when we arrived. When the men came back from the morning hunt, we had champagne on the veranda. Although they did not speak English, everyone was very welcoming. At lunch, I found myself having a very animated conversation, in French, with my neighbour, about agricultural farm machinery. How on earth did I know the vocabulary for that? I don't even know it in English. On the dot, the men left for the afternoon hunt, and the women visibly relaxed. It was Heritage Day in France, so they took us to see a local chateau. I loved this chateau more than any other I saw in France, for an extraordinary reason. Because it was derelict. Yes, really. Sometimes all that gold and crystal, gilt and splendour are too much. All those mirrors in magnificent frames, all those lustrous chandeliers, all those tapestries and painted walls, and furniture so polished and elaborate you see in many chateaux, are overwhelming. I felt sorry for this chateau, with its windows hanging loose or boarded up, with the ivy creeping up its walls and over the roof, with its garden a mass of weeds. It seemed so ordinary. Things do decay if they're not tended, and here was a neglected chateau, the poor relation, the pauper unable to keep up with its showy cousins.

Did it matter whether I said I was Australian or British? I don't think so. That must be a thing of the past, or a myth. I started off saying 'Australian', but I encountered puzzled looks. 'Why do you say you're Australian, when you were born in Britain?' was the most common response. Or, 'Do you prefer Australia or England?' Sometimes I was accused of being more Australian than Australians. Sometimes I was told I sounded too English to be Australian. Few people could understand the schism of being both. I never worked out a good response. In the end, it boiled down to making friends, whatever I called myself. What was satisfying was

to answer the question, often asked, ‘Are you English or American?’ with ‘Australian’. As foreigners we were all a bit exotic, but as Australians we belong to a minority group, and so are a bit special.

As regards the artists, fashion designers, *parfumeurs* and chefs, all I can say is that they were not part of my world there. Street cafes, on the other hand, were essential to daily life. That was where we met, where we gossiped, where we discussed why we had fallen in love with Paris. None of us came up with an answer to that one. It just is a wonderful city, which exerts its charm and draws you in. And there’s not that much dog poo on the pavements.



Because her husband had a job in Paris, **Gillian Bridgewater** spent the last three years there, with short trips back to Australia. As she did not work there, she had a chance to explore Paris and meet people. Previously, she had worked as a tutor at the University of Canberra.

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