

A YEAR IN THE LIFE: AN AUSTRALIAN IN EUROPE 1996

Lee Cooper

It was August 1996 and the start of my scholarship at the University of Amsterdam. This follows my travels across Europe for one year before I started my 'real' job at the Australian High Commission in London. This was not meant to be an ethnological or sociological study, more a reconnaissance mission: everyday observations offering a cross-section of an alien culture. Seven years down the track my only regret is that I can't be back where it all started; green, mean and full of beans. Bon voyage.

Amsterdam

28/8/97

I am sitting at my desk in my new abode, maps strewn before me, organising the chaos. On leaving the apartment, I hit the street turning right towards Centraal station, past the red-light shopping district. I turn right again and beauty-challenged North African ladies tap on their windows furiously. Many of the choicer cuts stand with their middle finger out, not aimed at anybody in particular, just a general 'piss off' device to dispel pervie tourists. Australians are definitely popular here; I get the 'Oh. AUSTRALIA... wow' response more often than not. Although my favourite line of 'sorry, I don't speak English: I'm Australian' is mostly met with nods or blank stares. The Italian, Israeli, and even American students have trouble understanding what I say, but I'm sure that this is due my accent. As a keen cyclist, I'm excited to learn that Amsterdam has the greatest number of Bike paths in the world (Perth is second), while the air is cleaner in Perth it's surely sweeter in Amsterdam. I may be lost but am one day closer to finding myself.

29/8/96

Have just seen THE museum in Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum, which houses a lot of commissioned paintings of rich merchants (and their dogs) during Amsterdam's 'Golden Age' in the 17th century. They openly celebrate their rich merchant history - albeit, through a merciless trade in spices and slaves. They were pirates; cruel, rich, without conscience, but quite civic-minded all the same. Even the crowning glory - Rembrandt's, 'the Nightwatch', was mistakenly named because of smog. Moreover,

the painting was then taken from its civil guard home to the palace, where a good two feet was chopped off so it would fit on the wall between two doors. That's the Dutch: beauty and pragmatism in equal measure.

30/8/96

The Netherlands has reclaimed over 20% of its land from the sea through a technique called 'poldering', but still has one of the highest population densities in the world. In 1963 the 'Provo' movement began in Holland initiating student/youth unrest around the world and heralding the 60's youth era, and in the local context, seeing the end of conservative, Calvinist Amsterdam forever. Maybe this is why the Dutch are so liberal: A third of Surinam came to live in Holland when they were kicked out of the Dutch empire in 1975. And Australia worries about a few hundred refugees. There's something in that for all of us. Here endeth today's history lesson.

6/9/96

Unless I can get some cash my interest in Dutch canal knowledge will be short-lived. God I love Europe; I find myself talking about Italian Neo-realist cinema in film class and getting right into it. Perhaps because there are 14 different nationalities in the room, no one has 'home advantage' or the right to bear prejudice. This is what it's all about.

16/9/96

So far I have sorted wheels, deals, meals, thrills, and windmills, but as yet, have no hills or feels. But I did see a live sex-show today. The circular room sported a naked woman (and later, a guy) and you could see all the people watching as their visors went up and down. That was the fun part but my Aussie sensibilities never did let me stay till the end.

24/9/96

Ik bin ein Amsterdammer! After finally making it to the alien's police and being rubber-stamped (which is longer than but not as painful as it sounds) I stopped to look around Haarlem. This has a distinctly North African flavour and can be a seedy part of town, but when hassled by a group of young punks, I simply smiled and pulled out my 'get out of jail free card', "G'day guys, I'm Australian!" Works every time (so far).

8/10/96

I love the cinemas here! Taking a cup of tea or beer into the cinema is how it should be enjoyed. The toilets even have a little picture of a fly on the enamel to encourage you to shoot straight – and it works! My 3rd bike is almost road-worthy - all I need now is a big lock and 2 rottweilers permanently attached.

Brussels

7/11/96

On top of our visit to NATO today and the European Union Parliament tomorrow, I have an interview with a desk-officer from the 'External Political relations with Eastern Europe' Directorate General of the Commission. I am going for this 'Stage' which would open a few doors - but the competition's pretty tough. My letter of acceptance into the second round says 'I must Lobby' for a position, which means 'flog myself'. There are other jobs appearing but I won't sacrifice job satisfaction for monetary gain. Unfortunately, I don't think I'll need to.

The Van Gogh youth hostel was in the 'gangland' of Gare de Midi, our group leader Nico had his wallet nicked within 2 minutes of arriving. The Grand Platz in the centre of Brussels is as magnificent as it is venerable. I enjoyed a coffee rubbing shoulders with the ghost of Karl Marx and the local beer 'Jupiler' is almost as sweet as the chocolate. The annual student party season had begun and these parties are not for the faint-livered. While my European mates slam-danced their way around the room, I entertained and bemused the locals by describing the game of Australian Rules Football using mime.

8/11/96 7am

Breakfast. Y'know you've had a big night when the waiter asks you to vacate the dance floor so they can serve breakfast. Our groggy group left for the European Parliament - and me for my interview. I made all the right noises but the officer suggested I try the Spokesman's Service. I met up with our group at the parliament but all talk of the 'pillars of the European Union' just made us think of bed. I stayed on to complete my interviews and have some fun and with Belgium now well and truly done (I was to later settle here for 10 months), I returned to Amsterdam to finish my studies.

I lobbied hard for the Commission traineeship, but will probably fail due to lack of languages and organisation, but not desire - I feel almost as European as I do

Australian and I've got the passport/s to prove it. Besides, over 300 000 million people can't be wrong even if they're not singing the same tune.

Kitzbuhel, Austria

20/11/96

Passing through Geneva the day they celebrate their famous defeat of the French in 1602. Townsfolk (you can't call Australians 'townsfolk') were dressed in traditional garb - complete with guns, pikes, feathered bonnets and armed with a humbling sense of pride in their city. The Genevans helped me appreciate a culture that not only has a past, but participates en-masse in celebrating it.

21//11/96

I travelled on a first-class train (age has its privileges) to go job-hunting in Austria and met many frustrated Australians and Kiwis who are unable to work in Austria because of the new work laws (Austria joined the EU 2 years ago and is coming into line of jobs for EU citizens only). I must remember to thank my parents for my dual nationality! On arriving to Kitzbuhel I asked for directions in bad German and the workman replied, 'yeah, no worries mate, stay at the place I'm staying!' Hence my first taste of the Aussie underground that infiltrates Europe! Kitzbuhel is very scenic - mountains dominate the sky and gothic buildings complement the old-world charm of the people. I had a dinky-di Wien schnitzel and a white beer washed down with lashings of good service from burly middle-aged ladies, a far cry from the lackey mentality of the service industry in Australia.

19/12/96

I'm pretty happy, I've just got a job as an Abwascher (which means dishwasher in English but sounds more exotic in German) and I did the whole interview in German! So there you have it, from school to work in 2 weeks and 4 countries. My head is spinning and I'm not even in Amsterdam.

24/12/96

It was the night before Christmas and not a creature was stirring - except me. It is fluffing down with snow outside and I feel alive after a solid day's work. Good job, good people, good night.

25/12/96

Well, Bing wasn't dreaming, it is a white Christmas and I've been skiing hard. I was one hour late for work because I took a wrong turn and ended up in a whole different village. But that's a pretty cool reason I reckon.

1/1/97

New Year has snuck by with barely a whimper. Lighting fireworks at 4 in the morning was fun, especially when our firework crashed into the building of the guy that complained at us. 'Welcome to 1997 arse violin!' I shouted (I told you my German wasn't very good). In true Aussie fashion, I downed a bottle of schnapps, 2 beers and some champagne while scrubbing pots. (You can take the boy out of Perth...) I have not had a day off in two weeks and the offer I've had to work in Bulgaria as an English teacher is sounding better all the time.

Budapest

27/1/97:

Happy birthday for yesterday Australia! I am passing through Hungary on my way to start a job teaching English in a small town in strife-torn Bulgaria. I should become rich doing this job but not, I suspect, in financial terms. I visited 'Hero square' today which is a park and monument built to celebrate Budapest's first 1000 years. In some cities, architecture seems an excuse for or an advertisement of a city's wealth, but Budapest wears its beauty like a well worn and handsome glove.

Sofia, Bulgaria

1/2/97

What have I got myself into? The border guards demanded \$250 American off me for entering Bulgaria. This should help the ailing economy and the currency - the Leva - which continues to lose value by the hour. The border stop in Yugoslavia on the way here was even worse; 3 nail-biting hours. All buses were checked for drugs, immigrants and video cameras, the latter to stop anyone videoing military installations - but more like to stop us seeing how badly they've f**ked up their country. Two guys were pulled off not to return. Having arrived in Dresden 1945 - oh, sorry, I mean Sofia 1996, I met the headmaster and we made our way to Pravets - a small town 50kms North, nestled in the Balkans. Bulgaria is in the midst of a great political and economic upheaval, so it's a fascinating time to be here.

3/2/97

Dobreden! The traveller is now a teacher. I spent my first day meeting the awe-struck kids who've had few (if any) Western teachers, let alone an Australian one. The teachers are learned and very friendly: I am teaching 4 different grades (of 13 - 18 year olds) and their excellent English surprised me. Not to mention their Russian, German and French. A three-course lunch in the canteen has shot up 200% in price in less than a week and this will increase tomorrow. My flat is Spartan yet comfortable, but shopping is a cross between going to the deli and hunting & gathering. The teachers are out demonstrating in the streets with the students and with just about everyone else it seems. It's an exciting time but I can sense the desperation of the people faced with an economy that gets worse daily. Barring civil war - speak soon.

5/2/97

Starting to get the hang of this teaching gig. I addressed the other school today with advanced students I could talk with, rather than at. I joined a sing-along of Bulgarian freedom songs (and Bob Dylan) – which they must have learnt from their folks. I went for a run today, to the foothills rich in natural springs - so at least my water is fresh. The football pitch is in poor shape but is in the process of being mowed - by 6 sheep. Most of the shops are closed due to lack of food. Petrol is becoming scarce – as are the supply trucks. I rang my nervous Mum and literally had to shout for her to hear me - much to the consternation of the operator connecting me – or rather, disconnecting me. I find the local custom of nodding for no and shaking the head for yes confusing but amusing.

9/2/97

I am sitting atop the Balkans, 2500 feet above and 3kms from my home in Pravets. I feel more alive than I can remember. It is hard to believe that such problems exist here, let alone of the magnitude in which they do. The good news is that the Communists are finally looking like they will go (taking all the hard currency with them of course).

15/2/97

I am back in Sofia and looking forward to getting the hell out again after doing my email and shopping here. When I asked when the next bus would be to Pravets, I was told there wouldn't be one. Oh. The petrol crisis is in full swing as I see 200 people race for a bus going anywhere near their home town, or in fact, anywhere. Private cars stop and offer lifts for the right price and competition for places is fierce - one lady had her shopping and then herself thrown out of a car by a 'wrestler' (Bulgarian

Mafia). Much to my (and everyone else's) surprise and relief a bus did come and as I boarded I was wondering if I would ever leave Pravets again, let alone Bulgaria.

21/2/97

I am in Pernik – as part of a debating conference for teachers from all over Bulgaria - it is all in Bulgarian, but it is all expenses paid in the best hotel in town - which has everything except heating, hot water, towels and sheets. I made a speech about the media in Australia but after living in Europe for some time, I realise just how much my perceptions have changed.

24/2/97

I just received a phone call from my (ex) co-ordinator in Amsterdam ((he'd been trying for 3 days) saying that the European Commission have offered me a traineeship! I am lying on my bed trying to get my mind around the idea of being a diplomat in Brussels.

3/3/97

Flying from Sofia to Brussels over a harsh and beautiful landscape – is analogous to the social reality here. At \$322, or 10 years salary, most Bulgarians will never know this high, only the lows. I am feeling guilt, sadness and some frustration as if I have left them to their fate. The headmaster presented me with a book about Pravets - the former home to the last Communist President and icon of Bulgaria, Todor Zhivkov. Visitors to the town reads like a who's who of infamy; Gaddaffi, Castro, Mobuto, Ciesescu, Khrushchev, Breznev and even Indira Ghandi - not bad for a town of 40 000 people.

Brussels ... again

4/3/97

I arrived at my friend's brother's place who, despite several attempts, never received word of my arrival from Planet Bulgaria. Thankfully, he was happy to see me and I even received a kiss on the cheek - as is the custom between lads in Belgium (I can't see it taking off in Australia though). Despite not having a room, at least I had a table over my head.

5/3/97

My first day as a European Commission Stagiaire was busy; our Liaison Comité had organised social, cultural and sporting events as well as trips to Barcelona &

Marseilles, Bruges and Strasbourg, all in our first month. I was reduced to an undignified shuffle because of my shiny shoes, but it helped me keep it real.

7/3/97

I have been elected to the 5 person 'Comité Des Stagiaires', responsible for entertaining 650 stagiaires for the next 5 months. My election speech went well, but pulling out a list of ideas and suggestions 30 feet long was always going to get me in. One for Australian ingenuity there. I had no luck getting my Belgian residency permit from the Alien's Police; they only speak French apparently – which seems strange, as no Belgians would need to go there. Hmm...

14/3/97

I am now working for the Spokesman of DG1 (External Relations & Trade) but at home, my landlady is insane. She happily rummages through my belongings and changes my rental agreement daily. All part of the experience I guess.

The 'Big trip' to Marseilles and Barcelona 26/3 - 1/4/97

The first stop for our bus full of Stagiaires was the large bank and duty-free shop that is Luxembourg. My first venture onto French soil was a cramped and restless one, but after bragging about how easy travel is in pocket-sized Europe, I was forced to grin and bear it. The French countryside is so French! I imagined the gnarled, heroic figure of Gerard Depardieu tending the vines and tilling the soil as we passed - très authentic. The coast and the Pyrenees vied for our attention down to Barcelona and Catalonia ('don't call us Spain!'). Yet another currency (bring on the Euro!) The energy and atmosphere of Barcelona was beyond compare, and Australia? I'm not even missing the past.

Brittany & Normandy, France

9/5/97

I am at the second most visited site in France (after the Eiffel tower) the 'Mont Saint Michel' - a grand cathedral on the Brittany coast. It experiences some of the highest tides in the world and is a cross between Saint Paul's cathedral and Alcatraz. Add some Gothic architecture and lashings of French history (church, bastion, prison, fort, monastery, etc) and you begin to get a feel for the place. The port town of Honfleur was as beautiful as Marseilles was seedy and I got the impression that the locals would pull down the set as soon as all the tourists left for the night.

Paris

17/5/97

By the time I got to the banks of the Seine river, we could see Monsieur Eiffel's tower dominating the landscape and a huge 'clock' on it counting down; my girlfriend dryly observed that it could be the amount of marriage proposals made up there – but was in fact the seconds left until the year 2000. My considerable expectations were exceeded by the monumental grandeur that is Paris - the most intricate and simply magnificent buildings I have ever seen, stretching as far as the eye could see. Paris is a nice place to visit but I wouldn't want to drink there. Next stop was the gardens of the Louvre museum ('Jardin des Tuilleries') for my 30th birthday picnic with a few of my favourite things; Mon Cheri, paté, camembert, baguette, and vin rouge. Our next stop was the Quartier Latin, where cafés spill into the streets daring the tourist to buy shares in a cup of tea. Our hotel was out of town just next to the graveyard housing the remains of Jim Morrison and the more talented locals, Hugo and Piaf. As far as 30th birthday presents go, this is the best I've ever had. That night we climbed to the Sacred Cours - a Taj Mahal-ish chalk cathedral that gets whiter every year. The view from the top was spectacular and unusually - sharing it with hundreds of other people just made it more special. This area also hosts Paris' greatest artists past and present and together, they all paint a pretty picture. George Bernard Shaw once said; "the United States and Britain are two great cultures separated by a common language". If this is so, then perhaps France is a greater culture separated by a superiority complex over everyone else.

2/6/97

While many talk of the 'democratic deficit' being the major problem facing European Integration, I see a greater problem facing Australian integration (or our new 'cultural cringe'). Europe is self conscious of its diversity and seems to be collectively tolerant. The issue of multi-culturalism in Australia seems to either confirm stereotypes or throw up champions – it's too black and white if you'll excuse the pun. Australia is a young nation with lots to learn, absorbed into the Global Village without yet defining our collective personality. I gladly perpetuate the myth of the tolerant Australian to my European friends, but right-wingers like Pauline Hansen and the support she has gained, makes me realise the fragility of our cultural identity. A long way to go my Aussie brethren. Perhaps because of this fact, in my 5 months away, I have yet to experience a homesick moment (sorry Mum). So far, the support for a borderless Europe is almost tangible (I guess war does that).

6/6/97

At the moment I am struggling with being both an Australian AND a European, despite having the passports to prove it. The media places us opposed to one another and preys on national stereotypes. The Nation-state seems to be created through this opposition.

11/6/97

There is just 10 days until our trip to Egypt! It is the first time in 37 years that a group of Commission stagiaires have gone outside of Europe, but hey, all it takes is an Australian to say 'what the hell!' in bringing the world closer together. It is interesting to be moving back in time as I move forward; from new Australia to the old world in Europe and now to the cradle of civilisation in Egypt. I have come a long way.

15/7/97

I am damn proud to be Australian - our naiveté is to the good; we can avoid the mistakes of older, socially troubled cultures by learning from their mistakes - but our background and isolation has harboured the racist seed, occasionally brought to fruition by great mouths rather than great minds. I believe deep down most Australians are tolerant of 'others' – but are not yet mature enough to believe it.

Epilogue

My first year in Europe has passed and while no closer to understanding what I have seen, I am at least more keenly aware of the differences that do exist. It was my goal to speak openly about what I have seen and done, and while this 'travelling postcard' approach has meant that I may have sacrificed the chance to explore issues on a deeper level, these glimpses have revealed much of the dynamic between place, the self and concepts of home than I would ever have thought possible. These observations may be out of date (if they were ever relevant in the first place); such is the ephemeral nature of our nation and nationality. Bring on the Global village! Happy travels...



As an Australian living in Europe for the last 6 years, **Lee Cooper** has learned a lot, mainly about himself. And looking back on these journal entries from his first year, he had a lot to learn. These musings taught him more about what it means to be an Australian overseas than he ever learned about his adopted home. His anecdotal

style was an attempt to capture the moment in conveying what he experienced and as he looks back to that first year and cringes at how naïve he was, he at least has the satisfaction of knowing he wore his pen on his sleeve.

Copyright © 2003 Lee Cooper, All Rights Reserved