

A Jamerican in Paris
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For decades, study abroad programs have been incorporated as elective options for students enrolled in private American universities and colleges. In a recent discussion with an executive director of the global studies program at a renowned US institution, I learned that while study abroad was, in the past, envisioned as an immersive opportunity to foster expanded learning through acculturation in a foreign host country, more current trends lean less toward an adaptive experience. Instead, study abroad programs today seem more structured toward the transplanting of the American culture onto the foreign soil where the program is situated. To participate in a study abroad program in Prague, for example, the student need not have studied or speak Czech, because the courses they attend in Prague will be taught English, by English speaking professors. Alternatively, while past exchange students lived with a family of the host country, or in other settings that provided extended exposure to both formal and informal cultural norms, today's study-abroad American students are far more likely to share a living space with each other, thereby limiting the opportunity to significantly increase foreign language competency and become seamlessly enmeshed in the culture. My friend, the executive director, likened the "new" study abroad experience to "being on an extended vacation" which, though beneficial, shortchanges the student if the goal is, in fact, to truly expand one's educational scope as a citizen of the world.

Having participated in study abroad (and also having taken several extended foreign vacations), I paused to reflect on my experiences as a past student in a global studies program. As I did so, and with my friend's pronouncement in mind, I also thought back to the impetus behind my initial desire to participate in study abroad and whether my ensuing experiences might support or belie my friend's assertions.

Studying internationally and learning foreign languages had been one of my goals since age nine. That's when I met my music teacher's daughter, Pauline, who spoke eight languages and worked as a translator at the United Nations. As a native child of the tiny Caribbean island of Jamaica, I was fascinated at the prospect of a life that involved travelling all over the world, meeting people of various cultures and tongues. This was a large part of my thought process when I applied to college and was one of the criteria that Columbia utilized in selecting my first-year roommate, Irene, who had expressed similar aspirations. And yet, when the time came for me to take the necessary steps to participated in study abroad, I hesitated. Repeatedly.

French was "my thing." I started studying it in the seventh grade on a dare, which turned into an unexpected love affair. Sort of like that blind date who turns out to be your soulmate. I discovered that I had a knack for French and the "odd" pronunciations that were unlike anything I had ever experienced. I still recall my very first day of French class when our teacher, Madame Lowe, picked a hibiscus flower outside the classroom door, then returned to dramatically present to us, "*la fleur.*" There were several giggles around the room and more than a few looks of utter confusion, but I, fascinated by this new challenge, immediately repeated, sotto voce, "*la fleur,*" i.e. "the flower."

My fascination grew as I learned about the country of France, the culture, the regions and an alleged “underground mall” which my imagination was too limited to fathom. Many years later I would discover that underground mall, “Forum des Halles” (or simply “Les Halles” in Parisian parlance), a sprawling and ever-expanding shopping center in Paris that was built largely underground on the site of Paris’s former open air food market that was demolished in 1971. I also continued to excel in all my French classes, prompting several of my French teachers to inquire whether French was my native tongue, or if perhaps my parents were originally from a francophone country. On one hand, I could recognize the backhanded compliment recognizing that they thought my language skills exceptional. On the other hand, I also discerned the unfortunate – and often unwitting – presumption that in order for me to speak French as well as I did, it had to be partially intrinsic as it couldn’t possibly be learned.

At any rate, I continued to study French throughout elementary and high school for as long as I could, finally coming to abrupt halt at the end of the tenth grade when my high school informed me they had no additional courses to offer. This precipitated a 2-year hiatus from French which I promptly ended upon starting at Columbia in fall 1985. Fortunately, I had retained all the French skills previously acquired and was able place into intermediate level courses. Still, when it was time to submit an application to participate in study abroad during my junior year, I felt less qualified than my fellow Columbia Francophiles, many of whom had already read the likes of Voltaire, de Maupassant, and Camus in their advanced high school French classes, while I ... had not.

Even more discouraging, however, was the realization of the additional expense that I would likely incur in moving to and living in a foreign country for six months. As the child of a single parent who was a widowed, elementary school teacher and therefore hardly “flush with cash,” I had to be cognizant of the fact that I also had a younger sibling who was entering his first year of college as well. It therefore seemed unrealistic – and in part, highly selfish – to even entertain the thought of studying abroad. I therefore divested myself of all such fanciful ideations, convincing myself that studying abroad was really not that important, and since I would nevertheless obtain a fine Columbia education, studying abroad was not truly critical. But then along came Stephanie.

Stephanie was one of my CC classmates whom I had quickly befriended during the first month at Columbia. Stephanie was one of those Columbia Francophiles who, through the benefit of her Exeter education, had read the French literary masters. And Stephanie also knew how much I loved French and how well I had performed academically in my French classes at Columbia. So, Stephanie decided that I would attend Columbia Study Abroad – even after I told her I could not. Everyone needs a “Stephanie” in their life, because without her insistence, I would have missed out on an experience that in retrospect was potentially the most defining points of my lifetime. It was Stephanie that pushed me to take the Reid Hall entrance exam which I aced; it was Stephanie that dragged me to the Reid Hall Office on campus to inform them that I was “extremely qualified” to participate in the Reid Hall program but didn’t believe I could afford to go; and it was Stephanie that demanded that Columbia provide financial assistance to make it happen.

Since I am writing this piece recounting my experience as a participant of the Columbia study abroad program in Paris, the rest, as you have surmised, is history. Thanks to the need-blind philosophy of Columbia University and the willingness to expand access to those students that may traditionally not have had access to the full breadth of its educational opportunities, on the gray, wintry morning of January 14, 1988, I arrived in Paris for the spring semester of my junior year. With Stephanie.

You don't know what you don't know, and what I could not have known without having participated in the Columbia Reid Hall Program in Paris is the breadth of the formal and informal education that I would obtain from just a semester-long experience. It is impossible to encapsulate in this piece all that I experienced in the Columbia Paris program and explain all that made my study abroad experience so invaluable. As a preliminary matter, concurring with my Executive Director friend, I must concede that it was the immersive nature of my experience that has resulted in its indelible impact on my life. To illustrate, I will strive to highlight some of my reflections, which I hope will in turn trigger warm memories for those of you who also participated in study abroad programs, and inspire those considering whether to embark on this adventure. In other words, I will strive to be your "Stephanie."

As a preliminary matter, participating in study abroad fundamentally changes you, I believe for the better - if you do it right. Many of my peers who studied abroad and left a boyfriend or girlfriend behind, often broke up with them during the study abroad period, or shortly thereafter, following the unexpected discovery that they had undergone changes that were enormous and yet so subtle that you hardly noticed them happening. It was usually only upon returning "home" and facing the metaphorical mirror of friends, family and culture, that you suddenly realized that you were a different person. I had heard about the phenomenon of "culture shock," but this phrase is woefully insufficient to describe how extensive an effect the study abroad experience could have on an individual. It is analogous to stepping out of a fictional biosphere that is the only world you have known, only to discover there are other, very different biospheres with expanded knowledge and experiences, and then be forced to return to your original biosphere, but with expanded perspective that makes you realize how much smaller that world is than you originally thought, and that there is so much more to discover than you could have imagined. In other words, you begin to realize how much you didn't – and still don't – know. The things we took for granted as "established," things that we never thought to question or doubt, suddenly seemed less incontrovertible. Processes, practices, norms, mores all called into question at what would be an earth-shattering extent - if it happened all at once. But because we lived it day by day and minute by minute, we seamlessly assimilated the changes without too much disruption – until we got home to our formerly comfortable biosphere.

Notwithstanding all I had read about Paris, nothing prepared me for all the elemental differences that I would experience, leading to what in retrospect were a number of simultaneously mortifying and hilariously funny moments. My only reassurance comes from a reminder that as babies, we all fall before we are able to stand steadily and walk confidently; and metaphorically, the same applies as we engage in the pursuit of learning, stepping out of our comfort zone. Besides, these foreign

faux pas (literally “false steps”) were not unique to me but were rather an unavoidable “rite of passage” for all of us studying abroad.

First off, study abroad demonstrated for me the importance of understanding and adhering to certain “fashion norms” – along with the importance of packing strategically. Before setting out on my study abroad adventure, I knew that Paris and New England share the same seasonal cycles. However, what I did not know was that in general, Paris winters are not as cold as New York. True, the temperature in Paris may dip below zero occasionally, but it does not usually attain the temperature extremes that I was used to in the Big Apple, or even Long Island. On the other hand, Paris offered a damp, bone-chilling cold that snaked into the bones, and sometimes made you feel as if you would never warm up. Lesson number one: to survive a Paris winter, you must dress in layers, always including a scarf to wrap your neck (you’ll notice Parisians always seem to have one); but avoid heavy, bulky coats that are usually more trouble than they’re worth. Unfortunately, because I did not have that insight, I arrived in Paris wearing a type of jacket that was all the rage back in New York at the time: oversized, stone-washed denim button down coat that was thoroughly fleece lined, made for Eskimos and windy New York winters. I was also wearing a gray wool beret (channeling my inner French artist) and a merino wool scarf. On top of this, I had two 70-lb suitcases that could potentially have enclosed a human body each, and a sizable piece of carry-on luggage, in addition to my handbag. In my mind, I needed all this because I would be away for a whole semester, so I had tried to fit in my suitcases all that I would have had in my Columbia dorm. Consequently, I almost died of heat exhaustion during my first hour on French soil, saved only by the taxi we splurged on from Charles de Gaulle airport. It cost us a precious \$100 dollars or so, but I’d like to think that my life was worth more.

The taxi was another in the series of continuing cultural “anomalies” that would pervade my consciousness throughout my 4-month Parisian *séjour*. It was a freshly minted, crisply maintained Mercedes Benz sedan. I was from New York, arguably the most fabulous city in the world, and yet our hails were canary yellow Ford Caprices, while Paris had Benzes? It was mind boggling. On the other hand, my first impression of the city of Paris was that it wasn’t particularly clean – though New York was still far dirtier – and that the rather snooty, exclusive air that I had expected to encounter was lost in the haze of the Gaulouises, a particularly pungent cigarette favored by the French at that time. Interestingly, to this day the smell of an unfiltered Gaulouise evokes a nostalgia in me that is hard to shake, a reminder of a simpler time and the innocence of my first Parisian experience.

We finally arrived at the Hotel des Ecoles in the 5th district or *arrondissement* of Paris where we spend the next few days. While check-in was unmemorable, maneuvering my luggage to our room also served as another lesson in cultural differences between the US and our temporary adopted home: elevators in Paris were still mostly small, manual structures that barely fit 3 “average” sized adults; which meant that three average sized adults with four trunk-sized suitcases – plus hand luggage – would not make it in one trip. So, three trips and six gallons of sweat later, we were finally ensconced in our room containing two twin beds, a small table and a modest wooden chair. As painful as that move-in was, I later realized how lucky we were that the hotel actually *had* an

elevator, as so many multi-level establishments did not. At any rate, finally able to divest myself of all the extra weight that I had been dragging around for almost 15 hours, I lay down and immediately fell asleep.

Waking up several hours later, after what felt like a good night's rest, I tried to call my mom to let her know I had arrived safely but was unable to get a hold of her. Stephanie also tried her folks but couldn't reach them either. A sudden panic overtook us both as we immediately concluded they must have suffered some catastrophic event that was preventing them from answering. We knew there was a six-hour time difference between Paris and New York, and since it was about 6:00 o'clock in Paris and still dark outside, we calculated it to be approximately midnight back home, so they should have been home. Filled with anxiety, we worriedly pondered next steps, until the television flashed the actual time in Paris as being 6:00 p.m. – not 6:00 a.m. – meaning that it was actually *noon* – not *midnight* – East Coast time. We had only slept for a few hours, so it was still the day of arrival, and our families were likely at work where they were supposed to be. In other words, lesson number 20 since arriving in Paris: before traveling to a new location, be sure to change your watch upon arrival (although cell phones now do this automatically), and verify the time difference, if any, between your point of origin and your destination!

Due to a combination of the *décalage* or time difference between NY and Paris, along with a healthy dose of exhaustion, we overslept the next morning and were on the verge of missing the complimentary hotel breakfast, so Stephanie called and requested that breakfast be brought to our room. The second day was a repeat of the first, and we again enjoyed the luxury of breakfast in bed. The third day, however, when I suggested that Stephanie reach out once more, she informed me that it was my turn to “speak up” as she had been doing most of the communicating till then. So, with great apprehension about my spoken French proficiency, I contacted Room Service and haltingly, in French, stammered out my request. For my efforts, I was rewarded with what I interpreted as a very French, though not unreasonable response, i.e., that we would have to come downstairs to eat breakfast, as it was the third day in a row that we had requested service, and enough was enough. Too timid to do otherwise, I thanked the nice lady on the other end and hung up the phone. I relayed the response to Stephanie, but we were still so tired, we decided to forego breakfast and go back to sleep. However, about fifteen minutes later, there was a knock on our room door, and when I opened it, there stood the young French woman who had not only helped us haul our monstrous luggage upstairs on the first day- while commenting on “*les américains avec leurs grandes valises,*” but who had also brought us breakfast the last two mornings in a row. Her arms laden with a breakfast tray for two, she issued a smiling “Bonjour!” before adding, “Did you want breakfast today?” In response, we stammered our incredulous, yet desperately grateful “*bonjours*” and “*yes pleases*”, whereupon she added, “I thought so, but when you called I asked to verify your room number but you said thank you and hung up the phone.” At which point, Stephanie quickly pointed at me and blurted “That was her!” Needless to say, immediate and palpable mortification set in, as I mentally filed this experience away as study abroad lesson number 54, which I now impart to you: Never default to “yes” or “thank you” in response to a question posed to you in a foreign language that you do not fully understand. It is always better to

ask someone to repeat more slowly or clarify rather than risk e.g. accepting a marriage proposal from a homeless person who lives in the subway.

Later that day, after spending the prior two days walking around the *Quartier Latin* or Latin Quarter near our hotel, Stephanie and I boldly ventured into the Paris metro to navigate our way to Reid Hall, on 4, rue de Chevreuse. Classes were scheduled to begin the next day, and we wanted to ensure that we knew our way around. Armed with metro maps and ticket 10-packs, we had little trouble getting onto the trains, but getting off introduced new challenges. We couldn't figure out why none of the train doors that we chose to use for exits ever seemed to open, and so we found ourselves sprinting through the cars trying to get off through doors exited by other passengers before the train took off again. It wasn't till after we had taken several trains that we realized that unlike New York City subway cars, Paris metro train doors did not open automatically – you had to either lift the arm or push the button to open them. Looking back, I can only imagine what the French riders thought of us, the two random Americans, dressed in Eskimo jackets, sprinting through the train cars while ignoring perfectly good doors. “*Les americains...*” Study abroad lesson number 56: Be aware that the different transportation systems in different cities, sometimes even in the same country, may work differently, so do your homework in advance, or just follow the natives' lead.

When considering attending Reid Hall for the spring semester, my initial thoughts about lodging centered around sharing an apartment with Stephanie, but I also know Paris apartments were three times as expensive as New York City apartments – ironically, a relative positioning that has since undergone a reverse juxtaposition. Although I had lived in Columbia dorms in New York City, Columbia didn't have dorms in Paris and I was unaware of other options.¹ So, when the Reid Hall housing coordinator raised the idea of living in a French *foyer* for the semester, i.e. a standalone French dorm for students attending university in Paris but whose domicile ranged from Marseille to Mali, I was overjoyed, particularly since I initially thought Stephanie and I would share a room, although this was not to be.

The Foyer de Charonne, located at 123, Boulevard de Charonne in the 11th arrondissement of Paris was a co-ed facility located a short distance from Pere Lachaise cemetery which boasts several notable residents including Jim Morrison, Richard Wright, and Oscar Wilde. There was an *accueil* or reception area at the entrance that no one was allowed to go past unless they resided there. On the lower level was a dining room where breakfast and dinner were served family style. Someone from each table was responsible for transporting a tray of shared meals from the kitchen window to the 8-person tables, while a second person usually brought the bread and condiments. The person who finished eating last was responsible for clearing the table. The first day that I arrived at the foyer, it was unfortunately dinner time, and I had to do the walk of shame to find an empty spot at one of the tables. There was only one available, so Stephanie had to go elsewhere, meaning I was on my own. With chatter and laughter swirling around me as my fellow diners

¹ I later learned that students could also live with host families in France. However, because we started mid-year, instead of fall, there were no more host families available.

checked out the new *américaine*, it was a shock to suddenly realize that I barely understood a word. Although I had studied French for years, and my reading and writing were good – with particularly excellent grammar – my *ear* had not yet caught up. Moreover, even when I did understand what was being said, it took so long to formulate a relevant comment - having to first think of what I wanted to say in English, then mentally translating to French before finally verbalizing it - the conversation had long since moved on. This led to study abroad lesson number 65: you rarely, if ever, achieve spoken foreign language proficiency merely through the academic exercise of language studies; you actually have to listen, speak and be immersed in it to achieve a speaking competency with some level of comfort.

Till that point, I had failed to realize how much of our native speaking ability is based on learned speech patterns or “predictors”, along with the opportunity to deduce context from physical cues, including reading lips and facial expressions. Additionally, French speech relies on “sound cues” that are different from English ones. For example, as a linguistics professor once taught me, classic spoken French syllables are “largely monotonous” and only change at the end of each phrase, while each English syllable is imbued with its own value. This is why a native French speaker attempting English often seems to emphasize only the end of the phrase in we often view as a Hollywoodized dramatic manner. And so without understanding the inflections embedded in classic French speech, on that first night with my French counterparts, I was utterly lost. Even when the other students spoke to me, my response time was so delayed (usually because I didn’t even realize they were talking directly to me) that I’m sure I seemed somewhat addled. But, with a sense of pride and achievement, I would look back on that night four months later, marveling at my ability to not only sustain a conversation at that table, but also encourage the new anglophile recruits to the foyer. Upon further reflection, it was this seemingly innocuous detail i.e. nightly dinner with other French students, to which I attribute my continuing French fluency over thirty years later. Had I lived in an apartment with other Americans or native English speakers, I would missed an enormous part of the value of the study abroad experience, namely the superior language instruction that could not been gained from a classroom setting, but also a number of cultural norms that became seamlessly embedded in all that I did. Learning basic, but necessary, dinner communication such as, “Pass the salt, please!” or “What’s for dinner?;” and being able to recognize when horse brains were the dinner entrée and therefore bypass it with a pointed, “*Euh, c’est dégueulasse*” (Oh gross!) were all tangible benefits of an immersive study abroad experience that could never be matched by classroom theory. And I gratefully absorbed it all.

My roommate at the foyer was Valérie, a Parisian chick who seemed way cooler than I would ever be in that oh-so-Parisian way. She stood barely 5-feet tall and sported a short dark pixie cut highlighted by dramatic mascara lined lashes. She also smoked – though never in our room – and had created a collage of empty cigarette boxes which adorned her bunk bed. As I got to the room she informed me, in French, that although she had studied English, we would only speak French, because the reason I was in France was to learn French. Still shell-shocked after my dinner experience, all I could do was nod my agreement.

Although Valérie’s initial high-handed approach might have been off-putting to some, we actually got along great and are friends to this day. Valérie shared my love of boys and lingerie and was happy to serve as my personalized consultant in all aspects of French culture. Be it dating rules, French style, French music, or mastering the art of bathing in a *bac*, a deep, unenclosed French cistern affixed with a handheld shower head which proved supremely challenging to all the American students, who, being used to enclosed, standing shower structures, would regularly leave a massive pool of water on the floor around the bath. In every sense, Valérie turned out to be a great source of advanced, practical French education. She was even my human dictionary, providing instant vocabulary references. I’d simply point and ask, “How do you say...?” and Valérie would translate. These translations came in unexpectedly handy, such as the time in my French conversation class for Americans, a student who was attempting to give an oral report about Mary Queen of Scots, whom it was believed had strangled one of her husbands using a garter, did not know the French equivalent for garter, which I was conveniently able to provide to the shocked astonishment of the matronly Madame leading the class. On another occasion in a class on French history, a student intending to address the suspicions surrounding certain acts that had resulted in a particular war, referenced *suçons* instead of *souçons*, and I kindly let her know that I was quite certain she had not intended to suggest that “hickeys,” were behind the war, but that was the word she had actually used. Again, the particularity of my vocabulary was called into question, but I was too thrilled at the secret insight provided my total and unapologetic immersion in France and French culture to be concerned.

In addition to my interactions with Valérie, there were countless exchanges with French students in the foyer. When the *gardienne* would leave for the night and the front doors were secured for curfew, we cooked up numerous parties or other social events to entertain ourselves, and I discovered that French university students share a lot with their American counterparts when it comes to social pursuits. On several occasions I found myself out partying till dawn with my foyer peeps, returning home after 6:00 a.m. when the metro resumed service, and then climbing into the foyer through a kitchen window that we had strategically left unlocked to allow us re-entry upon our return. I honed my vocabulary through after-hours drinking games in the common room, finally understanding the importance of properly using reflexive verbs to avoid accidentally (and unknowingly) propositioning others for sex; and after a particularly unforgettable evening, when in a stupid drinking challenge, I unwittingly asked one guy if he had ever “*f***ed a b*tch*” as opposed to whether he had ever “*kissed a cow*” – which is what I was trying to ask – I finally understood that one’s failure to place a definite article before a word such as “*le baiser*” can engender terribly unfortunate consequences. Indeed, these were grammar lessons that surpassed anything French class had to offer, and because they were learned in context, they became forever etched in my consciousness.

As is evident, there were myriad facets of studying abroad that imparted an indelible imprint on my being, but perhaps the greatest benefit I gained from studying in a country and culture other than my own was the opportunity to contextualize my life as I knew it through an expanded lens. Metaphorically, it was the equivalent of viewing New York City from the third floor of a building versus viewing it from atop Rockefeller Center. Suddenly, the relativism of our consciousness

becomes starkly apparent and immediately impacts our definition of truth and the infallibility of absolutes. Living and studying abroad amongst the French, immersed in and embracing innumerable variables, I became a new version of myself, not abandoning who I was, but adding invaluable facets. Because I embraced the opportunity to live as part of the fabric of my adopted home, I was able to absorb and replicate social cues and gestures, right down to a Parisian habit of what looked like “blowing raspberries” before answering questions that were perplexing. My willingness to meet my host citizens “where they lived” literally and figuratively, earned me profound physical, sociological, cultural and political insight into a biosphere markedly different from my own, wholly impacting my view of not just France, but the world.

Reading French history books and literature, examining political themes written by French scholars, dissecting cultural morés and then engaging in sociological comparisons, offered me clarity that placed in *bas relief* all that which I thought I knew before January 14, 1988. Coming from the United States where vacation policies were still largely limited to one or two weeks per year, then learning that French citizens had a right to six weeks of vacation annually made me question our quality of life benchmarks. Learning that most of the French students whom I had met – who were not wealthy – took regular family vacations each year, from skiing at Easter break (which is simply spring break in France) to exotic beach vacations to other European countries, the Caribbean and even Africa, shifted a prior perception based on my US upbringing that travel was primarily for the rich. And the fact that education was solidified as a right for all French citizens, evidenced by access to university for all French students, was both incredible and humbling. Once, I had to see a doctor while in Paris after developing chicken pox for the first time in my life, and the cost of the visit and prescribed medication was so nominal, it had me further marveling at the differences between this country and my own. Certainly, France was not utopia, but in many ways, I discovered acceptance and a feeling of rightness that until then, I had never known. I began to understand why Paris had attracted and irrefutably impacted so many renowned writers and thinkers of the past, from James Baldwin to Gertrude Stein, their raised consciousness reflected in their greatest works. Even today I still think of Paris as home and part of my extended family.

Mine was not a unique experience. I have heard many of these sentiments above echoed by so many of my friends who also participated in a study abroad program modeled on immersion and cultural integration. That some global study programs would now move away from that model in favor of simply relocating an American classroom from US soil onto a foreign setting makes me sad because of the vast and incomparable experiences and opportunities that those program participants will unknowingly forfeit.

Nonetheless, even with the new model, I would still encourage each student to seize the opportunity to study abroad if it is offered, because you don’t know what you don’t know, and once abroad, you are one plane ride closer to the possibility of stumbling upon one of the most rewarding and unforgettable experiences of your life.