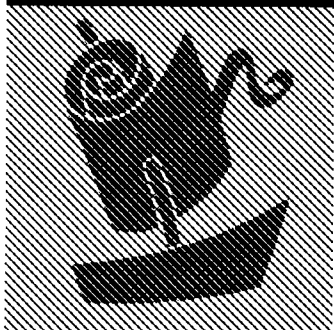


STUDY ABROAD



The View From France

by Celine Garelli

To learn other languages is to learn about other cultures and to have access to other worlds and different civilizations. When students decide for the first time to leave their country, their friends, and family to study for a semester or a year in a non-English-speaking country, it is already the beginning of an "adventure" and a break with their normal lives.

The student makes a great effort to learn about the different types of programs available, to make sure these programs will be compatible with their courses on the home campus, to set up a budget, and to thoroughly research the destination country. Then there are a lot of administrative papers to tackle and the preparation for not just a brief vacation, but a lengthy sojourn of a semester or a year.

When any of us plans to visit a new country, we build in our mind images of what we will see and how we will live. Generally, when one chooses a country such as France (or any other country renowned for its beauty), one is seldom disappointed, but there can be some disillusionment in practical terms.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of the director in organizing and directing the program. When a program is carefully planned, there is not a great divide between a student's expectations and reality. Practical problems can be overcome quickly with the help of the director.

During the first days everything is new and students need to find their landmarks. Not only must they adapt to the country, new habits, and a new educational system, they must also adapt to the group. Students in the same program come from different universities and meet together for the first time abroad. At first, they are shy and quiet, intimidated by the language barrier. Here, the director can help them to be more comfortable with each other.

Some students may complain about the housing which is available. In France we have no campuses; all our universities are in the middle of the city and French students live anywhere they wish. Foreign students generally live in international student housing where they will share a room with a French student or a French-speaking foreign student. Our dorms are located in the Latin Quarter, one of the old-

est sections of Paris, and are not as modern or spacious as American housing. So at first all this seems "Lilliputian," particularly with all the luggage American students bring from the States.

These dorms are private and are managed by a director and a staff. Each of them has special rules, such as a curfew, not taking showers after 10 pm, cleaning up, restrictions on visitors, schedules for cooking, etc. All this can seem overly strict to American students. Some, for example, cannot understand that when they visit the lounge or any common rooms which are shared for TV, piano, reading, meeting friends, or cooking, they should not be dressed in their pajamas. I remember one student who wailed, "But I am decent—these pajamas aren't even sexy!"

Another unwelcome discovery is that classrooms and housing are not in close proximity, although ours are at most only 20 minutes apart. This is not so great compared to a city such as Tokyo, where the average commute is 50 minutes. Last fall, when the three-week transportation strike required us all to walk everywhere, one American student was bold enough to ask the university to rent a school bus.

Having no campus life, the American student feels a little lost at first. French students are more individualistic and hard to meet. But as Americans start socializing by participating in a sport or going out to bars, they start meeting French people—just not as many as they thought they would. American students also tend to congregate together, eating in American restaurants such as Pizza Hut, McDonalds, and the Hard Rock Cafe, which, of course, is a handicap if they want to meet the natives.

During the length of the program, we organize many group activities such as visits to the theater, opera, ballet, and excursions. But we are not "tour operators" and we must respect each individual in the group. Students have different tastes. Certainly our aim is to persuade them to participate in activities, explaining that these are opportunities which may never come again. Indeed most students participate. But there will always be some who, due to their budget restrictions or personal preferences, will not join in these activities. Why not! They don't know what they're missing! What I want to point out is that a program director must accommodate these individuals without subjecting them to group pressure.

Paris offers so many cultural activities, of course, that many students go off on their own. Because France is geographically located at the crossroads of northern and southern Europe, where all the beautiful cities and countries are just two to three hours away, American students frequently travel. Certainly it is an excellent experience which I

Celine Garelli, a native of France, has lived and studied in Africa, the United States and France. She is currently the resident Paris Program Director for SUNY Oswego. This column is edited by Susan Ansara Bird, Director of International Programs at SUNY Oswego.

encourage. They learn to take any means of transportation (planes, trains, boats, cars, or even bicycles) and to get along, finding youth hostels, food, or making ticket reservations in any city, in any country.

Even though they travel too quickly (just two weeks to visit Italy, Greece, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, and why not include Ireland or England as well!) it is still an enriching experience. Unexpected benefits appear, such as learning to have confidence in themselves by learning to rely on their own personal resources.

One unsettling aspect of living in France is that our students are often surprised that the French recognize them as Americans, even without hearing them speak. They feel very uncomfortable about it. In fact they are not used to the Latin custom of people "scrutinizing" each other in the streets and cafes. So the poor American student at first experiences paranoia when confronted by this cultural trait. Gradually, he/she learns and understands what is considered the American "look" and starts to exaggerate it. Some American students also start to "scrutinize," or try to dress or cut their hair in the French way! The French--especially the young generations--are now much better acquainted with American culture and less critical of Americans. But often American students, hearing stereotypes about their country, think that the French are anti-American. Gradually some of them finally understand that, in fact, the French have a well developed sense of criticism, rather than being anti-American.

Each student reacts differently and adapts differently to these many new aspects of their life abroad. It is part of what is called "cultural shock." But once they pass this barrier--and some never experience it--they are ready to fully appreciate their abroad program.

The advantage of directing a program in a non-English-speaking country is that the students know before coming that there will be an important challenge with the language. Generally they are ready for it, and everything is done to help them out. They follow French language classes and lectures in French taught by faculty members of Cours de Civilisation Française de la Sorbonne. I rarely hear students

complaining about their adaptation to French. They are in classrooms of 25 students or they follow the lectures in a big amphitheater. Being able to talk in a foreign language and to manage their lives in a foreign country are already signs of independence for the students.

The European university system and especially the French system with just final examinations, requires much more personal responsibility from the students than the American system. The American student must learn how to manage his/her studies, and here the director has an important advising role. In fact, often students tell me that it was in Paris, for the first time, that they experienced almost no academic "authority" above them, except for the overseas director. At first it is hard, but it is also a challenge for them to learn to count only on their own will to work.

They also are aware that in the French system the grading is much more severe, and they worry about it. But rarely does a student dispute a grade. They understand and accept that in the French educational system we never discuss grades. Converting French grades (based on 20 points) into American grades (A, B, C, D, E) is, for me, a great exercise in gymnastics knowing that D and E grades are rarely given. Sometimes students must be urged to do extra work to bring up their grades.

The American student has a reputation for weak study habits compared to the French, Germans, or Japanese. So when a French teacher encounters an American student, the homework may be graded less severely. But French professors are much less protective of their students than in the American system. And for finals, the grading is absolutely equal for every nationality. I must say that sometimes I am anxious about one or two students when they don't seem to understand the self-discipline they need to pass their finals. Once more, the director's role is to be vigilant and to help the student in managing his/her studies.

I am always amazed at how much students have matured when they leave. They are much more confident and independent. This is our reward as study abroad directors. We hope they will return, and many do come back for a visit or as an employee of an international company.

