

Paris was mine

Penelope Rowlands takes a nostalgic look back on her student days in Paris - and wonders just why the City of Light has such an appeal for expatriates.

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'The experience of having survived as a foreigner in a place as tough as Paris causes you to see things in a new way,' says Penelope Rowlands | CREDIT: Photo: Mark Bassett / Alamy

I was an expatriate even before I was born - in London's Chelsea in the 1950s. My father was English but my mother was from New York, and she registered us children as Americans at birth. But because we were locally born and had a British father (a mere woman wouldn't have counted back then), we were automatically the Queen's subjects, too.

Until the year I turned 18 the law, at least in America, decreed that, on that birthday, you had to choose one nationality once and for all. My parents had divorced by then and we were living in Manhattan and I remember torturing my American mother, in the facile way of adolescent girls, by announcing - no doubt with great drama - that I was going to choose to be British because, of course, it was the superior thing to be. (Take that!)

In the event the rules changed just in time for me not to have to make that choice, and both passports were mine to keep, and have been ever since.

When I moved to France in my early twenties, it felt like home, not because of its natives, whom I found baffling and cold, but mainly for what it wasn't - not my father's country (although he was a lifelong francophile), nor my mother's, but a place all my own.

As a student in Paris you're never alone for long. It only takes a second before you become part of a huge, multinational swarm. You typically find your first friends in language class, drawn together by a conviction that you'll never, ever speak French. For me, this moment came as I sat in disbelief listening to a teacher expound upon a hateful thing known as the *ne explétif*, which is - no kidding - a meaningless monosyllable that's tossed into a sentence as a kind of fillip to improve its rhythm.

I knew the instant I met the *ne explétif* that I would never, ever master the French language, or even understand a culture that could dream up such a thing. But I was wrong. Mainly this was because of Paris and the youthful, multinational culture that buzzes through it, adding and dropping members as it moves ceaselessly along.

Some join the swarm as I did, in language classes where, since so many of your classmates come from different countries, you can only communicate in French. Which none of you speak. And because you can't speak it, but need to, you quickly learn.

When you do, Paris becomes yours.

You fan out into cafés and surreal-seeming *boites de nuit*, secure in the knowledge that your new friends are feeling as lost - and excited to be so - as you are. You mangle French to shrieks of laughter, drink beer on the steps of Sacre Coeur, then weave, singing, through Métro corridors before catching the last train home. You share youth and foreign-ness and the gift of a common enemy - the French! - a group you will ceaselessly dissect, pick apart, trade horror stories about and, just possibly, come to admire.

You enter a place from which, in a sense, you never return. For even if you race back to your native land - and whether you want it to or not - the experience of having survived as a foreigner in a place as tough as Paris causes you to see things in a new way.

Twenty years after I first lived in the French capital, I returned, this time with my five-year-old son; we stayed for a couple of years before heading back to the States. Still, I couldn't quite stay away, and for years returned there each summer to work.

Not long ago, I began to ponder why both my attraction to Paris and the city's effect on me had been so strong. I canvassed other writers, curious about what their experiences had been, then gathered their stories into a book, *Paris Was Ours*. These writers come from all over the world; their time as Parisians was distinctly their own. Even so, the intensity of the experience was the same.

One of them, the inimitable American writer Joe Queenan, summed it up recently over lunch in New York. "I was in Paris for a year at 21," he said, rummaging in his backpack for a small red leather address book, which he held up between us. "You can just pull that time out," he said, almost mystically, as we gazed at the book. He then riffled through its pages, as if shuffling a deck of cards. "It's the defining moment."

The red address book was his time in France, reduced to object size. It was a passport to a place that transformed him entirely.

I was back in Paris for a long stretch last summer and my son, a university student, joined me for part of the stay. He's 22, just about the age I was when I first lived there, and he has two passports, too (and even a third nationality, but that's another story). His French is good - he'd attended a bilingual school on the Quai D'Orsay when he was small - but he's forgotten quite a bit and I suggested that he sign up for a refresher course at the same Left Bank school that I'd attended.

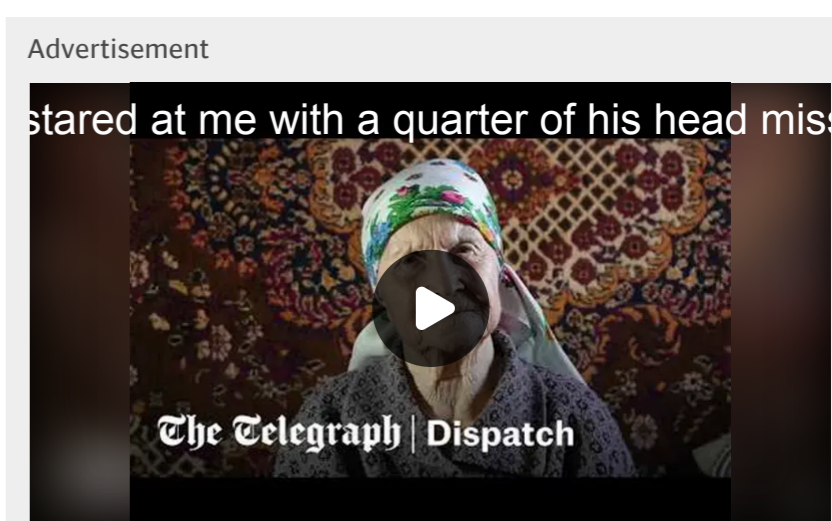
It only took one class for him to join the roving band I remembered, the one comprised of multinational youth, speaking iffy French, clustering in cafés, weaving through Métro corridors. I was delighted: student life in Paris is an experience I wanted him to share. But then he returned to the US, and school, and later in the summer I headed back home, too. And while now and then we speak French to each other, mainly we don't. Still, I've always assumed that one day Paris will be his, too.

So I was startled when he told me recently that he wasn't much interested in living in Europe, having set his sights further afield - perhaps Turkey, even China. Anyone who's raised children knows the feeling. That sudden reminder that your son or daughter isn't you. That their interests and their lives are their own. That the world moves on.

I was surprised, yet also relieved. For even if he opts for Asia over Europe, he'll still have his own version of Joe Queenan's red book.

So that's my message to him, and all of his young, restless cohort. Reject Paris, even Europe itself, if you must. But do, at some point, spend time as an expatriate, somewhere in the world. Join the swarm. Pack that expatriate passport. It's invaluable. And it will never expire.

Penelope Rowlands' book on expat experiences in Paris, *Paris Was Ours: 32 Writers Reflect on the City of Light*, is published by Algonquin Books on February 8. For more information, visit the website [here](#).



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