

A Year in the *merde** and other *merdes*

- the adventures of the skinny Singaporean boy in Paris

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My SEP experience can be considered unconventional. For one, I chose a non-English-speaking country, went for a full academic year rather than one semester, and then, of all places, the city of *d'amour* and blinding lights, Paris.

Paris, France. 31 July 2006. I arrived at the Charles de Gaulle International airport with six varying sizes of bags, a pathetic command of the French language, ready for my adventure ahead. I have always wanted to try out the SEP - it was the only ticket to experiential learning and liberty at the same time, and while I am still young, a chance to live life in a foreign land. Instinctively, I knew I wanted to go to a non-English speaking country, somewhere not in Asia-Pacific, culturally significantly different. And so I began my acquaintance with the French language during Year 1. On hindsight, it had been a little bit of a daredevil-ish move - afterall, a year of

French is definitely inadequate for a year in Paris, reading Geography in French. But then again, I survived. The trick is to immerse yourself completely in the culture, make lots of friends around, and dare-I-say, party like you've never done so before in Singapore (hey, nothing gets you speaking fluently in French better than getting a little tipsy and enjoying good company). So to any Geographer who is apprehensive over SEP in a non-English speaking land, I have only this advice: Just Do It.

I opted for the Paris-Sorbonne. *La Sorbonne* is one of the oldest, established universities in the world, and housed at the *Quartier Latin*, cradle to the world's best thinkers and legends. Renowned for its unparalleled education in the Arts, humanities and social sciences, this prestigious public university founded since the 13th century had somewhat lost its former glory, yet still highly sought after. I remembered being invited to a reception party held at its more than 700-year-old wing, and was completely blown away from the stately grandeur. Lifts are nearly non-existent - instead, we have winding stairs that goes on forever. This institution is such a historical icon that we have 'bouncers' positioned at all entrances, authorizing access only to Sorbonne students.

There is always the element of culture-shock for all SEP students. And sometimes, the language differences which can be trying. And then, there is France. Bureaucracy is after all, a French word. Imagine my frustrations when my renowned Paris-Sorbonne university barely has an online system handling matriculation, modules-registration, and news is posted on notice-boards. *Quelle horreur*. And while I am at it, my one-year stay in France requires a *carte-de-séjour* (residency card), which took me more than half a disastrous-and-arduous year to get it. There is a whole list of things to gripe: securing your bank account (oh *Mon Dieu!*), train strikes (*Merde!*). Sure, I missed all the speed and efficiency guaranteed in Singapore. But it also made me realize that, so what if you do not get things the way you want it instantaneously. You simply shrugged your shoulders, go "Pff" and walked off dignified. The world actually continues to revolve and no lives are lost. It was certainly a great lesson for me to discard the instant gratification I've always expected, and I became a more patient man. Just remember: When in Paris, do as the Parisiens do.



Paris is definitely one of the more expensive cities to live in. And for that reason, I lived a good 8 months in one of the lovely French suburbs called Savigny-sur-Orge, 20 minutes away from the Paris city centre. Home to two burnt cars beside my house as a result of arguing neighbours. I am proud that I had been recognized and accepted as part of the community (again, may I stress the importance of local knowledge and language): the *mesdames* at the *boulangerie* instinctively knew what bread or pastries I wanted, and twice when I ran short of money, they gave me a sly wink and off I went with free croissants. The pharmacist and the supermarket cashiers greet you in that typical cool-composure French way - but breaks out into silly jokes with you. The locals jammed the train doors just so that you can dash onboard the train, and you hold the swinging doors for the skinny-chic mums single-handedly carrying prams up the endless stairs in stilettos, in the *metro* stations. Whoever said the French was a snobbish unfriendly bunch obviously forgot that this country is also a socialist country with strong sense of community support. I would like to say this to anyone who is having second thoughts over SEP due to financial reasons: Money can never buy this incredible journey as a youth living in a foreign land, and do not worry too much about finances anyway. There are millions of avenues to raise funds, in my case, I was given the DUO scholarship award and I slogged my way through Year 1 with five tuitions kids and weekends with Louis Vuitton. NUS hands out loans too. In the words of my former Econs tutor: beg, borrow or steal. The experience is priceless. Especially when you are in Paris at a time Sarkozy was elected and you rooted for Royal.

Now the French are not all the unfriendly as they are made out to be. For some strange reason I have an affinity with Germans and my best buddies whom to date, still chats excitably over our return to Paris. I supposed I had been very fortunate, to be part of the Year 3 Geography fraternity (I opted to do Year 3 rather than 2). My best friend in school was the one who made me sit beside her and do exactly what she was doing, after my initial jaw-dropping shock at the complete incomprehension over my first lesson of Geomorphology, in French. Being one of the few students on exchange during the first semester, not to mention, an Asian and a very tall one, attracted lots of attention and thankfully, positive ones. My classmates have been extremely helpful with sharing notes and giving tips (and gossips..), and the professors excited over my presence. Oh, did I mention for all of the Geographers were made to do a module on Singapore in Year 2, and subsequently an optional module on South-east Asia in Year 3? I must have been the first walking specimen into the *Institute de Géographie* from Singapore. Naturally, everyone was curious about what exactly is a Singaporean. I have done exciting modules too - imagine working on the Geography of vineyards and wines. I made my Austrian roommate drove up to Champagne, Reims, to well, have champagne. All in the name of fieldwork.



With group projects, attempts to read for tests and exams, and soirées (parties at friends' place), the command of the language naturally improved exponentially. I had to. Everything was in French. French Geography is so different from the anglophile world of Geography we have learnt all our lives. It was incredibly refreshing to see another perspective of reading Geography. As Geographers, what good is it if we do not attempt to observe first-hand what else the world has to offer?

What is most appealing about SEP Paris, is definitely the lifestyle. Everybody is beautiful. I never looked more effortlessly chic than ever stepping out of the house everyday. There is always the garden of Luxembourg across my school to spend a quiet time contemplating amidst the beautiful scenery. Soirées and parties across all levels - from noisy house parties to chic exclusive clubs rubbing shoulders with models and fashionistas (credit goes to my best buddy's fashion journalist housemate). Strolling along *la Seine* river on a date. Impressive museums to drop by occasionally to marvel at the works of the famous. And the happiness that overwhelms you as you skipped past, gazing at the inspiring architecture. The legendary evening wine-appreciation/picnic parties I organized in front of the *Tour d'Effiel*.

More than anything else, SEP is not really about studying. It is about learning – be it learning a new way of life, culture, language and most importantly, yourself. The freedom and responsibilities that entails in the SEP, the frustrations and traumatizing moments, only reveal what you are really made of and eventually, make you a better person. Travel broadens the mind, and bearing a European university student card makes traveling cheap and chic! Jetting across different European places can never be any easier, and everywhere I go, I felt as though I brought a little piece of Singapore to friends and strangers all around the world. Do not forget that while you are on SEP, you are an ambassador not only for NUS, for Singapore but also, yourself. My advice for the SEP-bound is to show your

always adapt and willing new and dangerous (it's risks; not gamble). The my travel adventures was trekking across the High Mountains in Morocco before by any tourists), food and tent with the That and sleeping on the



personality, to try the calculated highlight of definitely Atlas (never done sharing nomads. Sahara.

I was somewhat from life back home. But having good support from the Geography department makes life so much easier when I needed last-minute modules approval and my heartfelt *Merci Beaucoup* to Mrs Chong (*le* Miss Geography and my SOS), Prof Lee Yong-Sok (YSL – how apt that I head to Paris, ever-encouraging guide) and her SEP-coordinator successor Prof Pow (whom I think is the best candidate for the job!). Of course, to our HOD Prof Shirlena who agreed to my extension of SEP to a full year. Without these fantastic four, would I still be known as *Monsieur Paris*?

It has been more than 6 months since my return from Paris and I have not stopped missing the place I called home away from home. Perhaps I never will. This is one journey in life that will leave a deep impression, and (re)shape the way you see the world.

*Paris, je t'aime.**

- *Merde = shit*
- *Paris, je t'aime = Paris I love you.*