

STUDY ABROAD

LEARN TO OPEN THE DOOR



I remember standing outside the door to my room trying the key in different directions for almost an hour. I checked and double-checked that I had the right room, the right key, and the right keyhole. Nothing. That door stayed stubbornly shut. In the end I had to ask a hostel employee to help me. I had thought it was just jetlag, and assumed that after sleeping I would adjust to the time difference and doors would spring open almost on their own.

But this was not the case. I found keyholes in France to be much stickier than keyholes in the States, and for weeks I was standing on the outside of doors trying different ways of turning the handles, jiggling the keys, and kicking my way into hotels, hostels, apartments, and houses. Envious, I watched how effortlessly French people entered their own homes—even children could open doors without seeming to think about it.

Of course, I got better at the doors. Patience, perseverance, and a sense of humor guided me through those early days. I learned a lot about French culture by observing. There I was—twenty years old—and had been granted the opportunity to stand outside the giant door of cultural difference, and gradually learn to let myself in.

But during those first weeks in France I felt a lot like I was always standing in the doorway—on the threshold of walking toward a different way of perceiving the world. I lived in Lyon, the second largest city in France, where I rented an apartment, paid bills, made friends, watched theater, ate in bistros, and studied literature alongside French university students. I chose to spend most of my time

away from other Americans, so my language skills grew out of necessity. For seven months I focused on figuring out how to respectfully go through that doorway.

Lyon is located at the confluence of the Rhone and Saone rivers, and I walked those banks day after day, absorbing the accents, smells, patterns, and mannerisms of the former silk-producing capital of the world. I strolled through the farmers' markets and artists' sales that daily rotated spaces along the rivers. I asked questions constantly, spending hours in cafes sipping thimble-sized espresso, while trying to understand French politics, social policy, and cultural norms.

And yet, while struggling to open the door to French cultural identity, I was surprised to find how much time I spent reflecting on my own culture. My semester abroad forced me to confront my own ideas and understanding of the United States and my place in it. As the months passed, I watched and read the world news with new eyes.

My last months in France fell in the summer. I remember going out for ice cream with some friends on one of my final nights. We sat outside in one of the town squares, our feet weaving patterns on the dusty red ground. A waitress came to our table and took our order. I asked for a mint flavor "After Eight," called by its English name. The waitress paused after I spoke as if she couldn't quite make up her mind about me. "Wow. Your English is pretty good," she finally said in rapid French. I took it as a sign that I had somehow budged that door just a bit.

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