Europe, a comparative view of the continent
QMUL Expeditions report 2012

In late June 2012 myself, at the time a 2nd year International Relations student, and two friends, Jack Gardner Materials Science student and Thomas Voice Geography and Business Student set off on a road trip across Europe. The trip itself had been discussed for many months beforehand, I myself had mentally planned a trip of this kind since before I can remember. However it was the generosity of Queen Mary for which we are extremely grateful to grant all three of us the expedition grant which enabled us to facilitate this trip and study of the kind none of us had taken part in beforehand.

Our fortnight in Europe had been painstakingly planned in advance, once as many campsites as possible had been booked we decided on a route that would best encapsulate as much contrast on our journey. This meant that not only did we see the obvious natural geographic contrasts between say the Alps in Switzerland and the impossibly flat interior of central France, but also the differences between regions with regards population concentration. From my International Relations standpoint, I was particularly excited to witness first-hand the differences in lifestyle, culture and political views of differing regions of Europe. Altogether we travelled through seven sovereign states, five of which are members of the European Union. These countries were France, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Austria, Germany, Luxembourg and Belgium.

We arrived in France on the 25th of June, and despite the 21 miles of water separating the United Kingdom and France the casual observed notices many differences, firstly the architecture and weather is noticeably different then secondly the differences in lifestyle and culture. The café culture of the continent is demonstrated perfectly in France, a place where the stereotypes of three hour lunches aren’t exactly accurate but a place where you probably wouldn’t catch office workers grabbing a pasty on a fifteen minute break lunch break. First-hand I came to a realisation of why new Labour’s 24 hour alcohol license has endured so much criticism in the UK and why views are indeed so much more liberal on the continent. The reason for this is a combination of factors, firstly and obviously the weather facilitates casual consumption of alcohol and not to excess, not to be too critical of the British, (in my experience) the mind-set is that nice weather is to be celebrated with consumption of alcohol. As there is considerably better weather on the continent than in the United Kingdom (I come from a North Eastern perspective) the people there do not have to cram in as much beer garden drinking before the rainclouds return and so the consumption of alcohol is much more relaxed.

Another reason for the success of a liberal attitude to alcohol consumption on the continent is that unlike in Britain where it is still easy to find a pub that does not sell food or anything much other than beer, these do not exist in the same way on the continent. This is especially true in rural France, Switzerland and Germany. In these places a bar is never just a bar, it will also be the village shop, tobacconist, betting shop and in one case strangely a fireworks emporium, but first and foremost it is the focal point for the local community. We were almost consistently made to feel welcome wherever we went, despite the fact that we chose to visit places that receive less tourist footfall. We did visit the big cities, where big city attitudes are the same the world over, but in the smaller towns and villages we truly got
a feel for nature of the countries we visited. In the tiny village of Piffonds in central France our grasp of French was a necessity as no one spoke anything other than the vernacular but that didn’t detract from the general level of friendliness extended to us. The same was true in Vaduz which although the capital of Liechtenstein only holds a population of 5,000, our collective German language ability was not up to the same standard as our French but we still enjoyed a fantastic two days where we could make ourselves understood without resorting to English as we noticed countless Americans inevitably doing. Another example of a place where we were made to feel extremely welcome despite the language barrier was the small town of Kerkel in the Western Saarland region of Germany. We happened upon a local brauhaus which was the venue for a fantastic evening spent enjoying the local beer and food, the locals had plainly not had British students holiday in their town and venture into their local pub before, but that didn’t stop them attempting to communicate with us. Both sides enjoyed the humour of our respective garbled attempt at the other language, it was all a perfect example of how language, historical and cultural differences do not have to stop people being friendly with one another.

When we arrived in Brussels we discovered we had been rather fortuitous with the location of our campsite that had been preselected months before as we were in fact less than quarter of a mile from the European Parliament building. After a day spent walking around the capital of Belgium we came across a square bordered by bars with pop up beer stands dotted around the place. We sampled the local specialities and began talking to some people whom we believed were local to the city, we soon found out that in fact no one in the vicinity was a true local since the majority of the summertime early evening drinkers were in fact staff at the nearby European Commission. The pair we chatted to were native Danes who spoke impeccable English on account of the necessity to so all day at the office. They spoke with passion of the benefits of the European Union in bringing people together from such different backgrounds to work for a common cause. I asked of their opinion on the current Eurozone crisis (like ourselves Denmark is a member of the EU but maintains its own currency), they were generally optimistic of the future of the currency and believed that consensus would be reached to keep all current nations of the Eurozone in the Eurozone.

In Brugge we found a culture and history fairly similar to that of the capital Brussels, on account of it being situated 60 miles away we were not too surprised. However when at the campsite we started talking to a Flemish Belgian we started to realise that in fact Belgium is two nations in one state with the uneasy dividing line between the south French speaking Wallonia and the northern Flanders being the multicultural multilingual capital Brussels. As a student of International Relations I actively seek out news of current events around the world, I disused with our Flemish friend the recent lack of government in his country which lasted for 541 days after the 2010 election. The contrast is clear between the centralised United Kingdom in regards central government and the very weak federalised system in place in Belgium. Our Flemish friend found Britain’s political arrangements comical, it was obviously amusing to him about how suspicious and apprehensive the British people were and are about our current coalition government, since in Belgium and Europe as a whole coalition government is the rule not the exception.
Our trip was without doubt a life changing experience and one that we are all so grateful we had the chance to go on. The trip met all the clichés of travel broadening ones horizons and being eye opening, clearly there were differences between countries we visited, but altogether people are people, the trip rewarded my positive feelings about human goodness and of the existence of a European community. Whilst in Austria the fuse fused in Jack’s car, we happened upon a local car garage, we showed what component on the car had broken and without hesitation a man went and fetched the part. The relatively small gesture of giving us the part for free meant so much to us and helped consolidate our good feeling towards the continent that to most of us we feel isolated from but in reality we should have nothing but respect and companionship towards.

Lewis Durham 3rd year International Relations student
100104259