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Incident at Paris

I must get in a word about Parisians. I was visiting Paris in 2005 with my friends when the following incident took place.

On our last evening in the city, we were late in returning from a visit to the Eiffel tower. We were tired as all restaurants near our hotel were closed. We walked through the neighborhood, starving, searching desperately for succor, when we noticed a quaint little restaurant in the corner. The glass door was closed, the chairs had been put up, but a small light was on. Seeing us peering, a man came out. My friends tried to communicate with him in English, but he flatly refused to humor them. At their request, I rather self-consciously asked him in my halting French whether the restaurant was open or not. The moment he heard the line in French, his demeanor changed. He welcomed us warmly, put down the chairs, (the restaurant had been closed and we were the only guests), and he took our order and made the chef cook a wonderful dinner of chicken and salad for us. We could not thank him enough. This incident is one which I recall with great fondness. It was a lovely lesson in shattering of stereotypes; we made an effort to respect his language, and he went out of his way to reopen the restaurant just for us and fixed us a dinner.

Great memory indeed!

In Kolkata, West Bengal, India

FOLLOWING SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AT CHICAGO

In 2015, I visited the Chicago Museum of Art, which has been commemorated as the “number one museum in the world.” Tucked away in a corner of the museum is the small but well-maintained Fullerton Hall. It was here that the great Indian mystic, Swami Vivekananda, stood at the now-hallowed delivered his electrifying speech at the World Parliament of Religions on September 11, 1893. A plaque marks the site, and leaflets are available that contain an introduction to Swamiji as well as the full text of his speech. The flyer further mentions that “Passionately and eloquently, Vivekananda called for the end of religious bigotry and intolerance...” It was a speech that still has significance in today’s world.

Five years later, the original auditorium was replaced by Fullerton Hall. However, a museum employee told us that the existing dais was the same one used by Vivekananda. And yes...the name of the street where the museum is located is “Honorary Swami Vivekananda way.” As an Indian, I felt proud and appreciative of the respect accorded by America to Swami Vivekananda.

In Chicago, IL, United States

IN MY SHOES

I have inherited, from my Myanmar-born grandmother, tiny hands and feet. And while my hands have brought me glory, favorably commented upon by the world at large, my feet have only brought me despair as I am rarely able to find shoes that fit me perfectly. While I have done some hand modeling for a couple of articles during a stint with a fashion magazine a few years ago, my feet have been stared at by people who doubtless thought that they belong to elfin creatures from fairy tales.

Summer is a season that I spend gazing enviously at other girls' shoes. Beautiful bellies, graceful ballets, seductive platforms and wedges tantalize me with unfulfilled desires. The ladies in my office move around me, shod in beautiful designs. I stare at shoes and weave dreams around them. The bane of being stuck with small feet of non-standard size seems unbearable in summers. It is difficult for me to find footwear that fits me perfectly. And it is all the more cruel during summers, when footwear fashion is at its peak.

Thus, to me, shoes have similar artistic value as Renaissance paintings. I admire with longing their designs and styles, and pore for endless hours over fashion magazines staring at exquisite Choos and Loubotins and Ferragamos. Just as the singer Sting dreams of gardens in the desert sand, I fantasize about being able to coordinate my shiny mulberry and green handbags with matching shoes.

In India

AMSTERDAM: VIBRANT AND COLORFUL

I went on a tram ride and visited the largest mill in Amsterdam. I went on a boat ride through the famous canals, and it was such a peaceful experience that I began to feel drowsy. Then I went on a 'walking tour' and saw that Amsterdam was a lovely, vibrant city. Children were taking part in a 'street painting' competition'. People were dressed in clothes. And oh, how could I forget posing next to Bob Marley at the entrance of Madame Tussaud's wax museum?

As part of their heritage, the Dutch had beautiful wooden shoes on display everywhere. An internet search revealed: " Until after World War II, almost every village bore its own wooden shoe maker, resulting in a variety of styles, colors, carvings and decorations." Those shoes were being sold as souvenirs everywhere. I even posed inside a sunflower-yellow clog for a photograph.

Even today, whenever I think of Amsterdam, I close my eyes and recall the sights and colors of the city. I remember my ride through the canals on a lazy afternoon, and think of Lewis Carroll's words:

Ever drifting down the stream –
Lingering in the golden gleam—
Life, what is it but a dream?

In Amsterdam, Netherlands

AMSTERDAM: THE SPIRIT OF ANNE FRANK

I went on a bus tour from Berlin to Amsterdam to satisfy my curiosity about one of the world's most famous capitals. I was an exchange student in Germany and used my summer holidays to explore new places. The night-long journey was exhausting, but the sky blossomed into a beautiful sun-drenched September morning. The grand hauptbahnhof, or the main railway station, was our drop-off point. From there, we were free to explore Amsterdam as we pleased. I was delighted to observe that Amsterdam had trams and a chaotic traffic system similar to my hometown, Kolkata.

The most poignant detail of my Amsterdam visit was, of course, a trip to the Anne Frank museum. Here, pages from The Diary of Anne Frank came alive – the fake bookcase that swung open to reveal a flight of stairs that led to the rooms where the Frank family and a few others hid for two years, before they were betrayed to the Nazis and sent to concentration camps. Anne was fifteen when she died at Bergen Belsen concentration camp, but her extraordinary legacy, captured in the pages of her diary, lives on. Till date, her bedroom wall has the restored pictures of the movie stars she stuck there to make her room less squalid.

Not surprisingly, my heart became heavy after my visit to the museum. I could not get the young, spirited girl out of my mind, and the way she met her tragic end.

In Amsterdam, Netherlands

About Author

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I am a Content Writer by profession, and a Creative Writer by passion. Writing is my oxygen. I also love traveling, poetry, and movies. My first book, a collection of poems, was published in May 2017.

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