

Travel and language

When I was very little, I caught the travel bug. It started after my grandparents first brought me to their home in France and I have now been to twenty-nine different countries. Each has given me a unique learning experience.

At five, I marveled at the Eiffel Tower in the City of Lights. When I was eight, I stood in the heart of Piazza San Marco feeding hordes of pigeons, then glided down Venetian waterways on sleek gondolas. At thirteen, I saw the ancient, megalithic structure of Stonehenge and walked along the Great Wall of China, amazed that the thousand-year-old stones were still in place.

It was through exploring cultures around the world that I first became interested in language.

It began with French, which taught me the importance of pronunciation. I remember once asking a store owner in Paris where Rue des Pyramides was. But when I pronounced it PYR-a-mides instead of pyr-A-mides, with more accent on the A, she looked at me bewildered.

In the eighth grade, I became fascinated with Spanish and aware of its similarities with English through cognates. Baseball in Spanish, for example, is *béisbol*, which looks different but sounds nearly the same. This was incredible to me as it made speech and comprehension more fluid, and even today I find that cognates come to the rescue when I forget how to say something in Spanish.

Then, in high school, I developed an enthusiasm for Chinese. As I studied Chinese at my school, I marveled how if just one stroke was missing from a character, the meaning is lost. I loved how long words were formed by combining simpler characters, so *Huǒ* (火) meaning fire and *Shān* (山) meaning mountain can be joined to create *Huǒshān* (火山), which means volcano. I love spending hours at a time practicing the characters and I can feel the beauty and rhythm as I form them.

Interestingly, after studying foreign languages, I was further intrigued by my native tongue. Through my love of books and fascination with developing a sesquipedalian lexicon (learning big words), I began to expand my English vocabulary. Studying the definitions prompted me to inquire about their origins, and suddenly I wanted to know all about etymology, the history of words. My freshman year I took a world history class and my love for history grew exponentially. To me, history is like a great novel, and it is especially fascinating because it took place in my own world.

But the best dimension that language brought to my life is interpersonal connection. When I speak with people in their native language, I find I can connect with them on a more intimate level. I've connected with people in the most unlikely places, finding a Bulgarian painter to use my few Bulgarian words with in the streets of Paris, striking up a conversation in Spanish with an Indian woman who used to work at the Argentinian embassy in Mumbai, and surprising a library worker by asking her a question in her native Mandarin.

I want to study foreign language and linguistics in college because, in short, it is something that I know I will use and develop for the rest of my life. I will never stop traveling, so attaining fluency in foreign languages will only benefit me. In the future, I hope to use these skills as the foundation of my work, whether it is in international business, foreign diplomacy, or translation.

I think of my journey as best expressed through a Chinese proverb that my teacher taught me, “I am like a chicken eating at a mountain of rice.” Each grain is another word for me to learn as I strive to satisfy my unquenchable thirst for knowledge.

Today, I still have the travel bug, and now, it seems, I am addicted to language too.