Big is beautiful

It is said that when we travel to a foreign country, our perception is heightened. Only by a contact with what seems alien we become able to recognize differences and commonalities, and finally understand our true self.

It is quite impossible to be totally oblivious of the USA in today’s world, a point that is not necessarily true in reverse. America has become the world’s only “hyperpower” – a term coined by French Minister for Foreign Affairs Hubert Védrine in 1998, denoting concurrent dominance in the political, diplomatic, military, economic, financial and cultural arenas. Our newspapers, shops and movie theatres are full of things American. Thus, when we arrive in the United States, we are not novices, but are heavily impregnated with images of what America is or is supposed to be, and we carry prejudices and stereotypes in our baggage. We have moments of déjà-vu because we have seen certain landscapes, street corners and situations on celluloid before. We think we know what this country is about – freedom, money, shop-till-you-drop, the pursuit of the American Dream – and what not.

My voyage to the New World started when I was packing for my trip over the Atlantic in the summer of 2005. To ship all the stuff I thought I could not live without, I needed a new suitcase. A gigantic suitcase. Thus, I took a little trip to downtown (I actually walked there, the center of the city being easily reachable by foot), where I found a really huge and really cheap piece of luggage. Only on my way home did I realize that I probably hadn’t made the best choice. The suitcase didn’t move easily and would become impossible to budge once full. But I could not return my purchase to the shop, as it already showed traces of use. Later that night, I related the story to a friend, remarking that I hadn’t thought about my acquisition properly. His reply? “You already have adopted the American spirit – big is beautiful!”
I have always had mixed feelings about the United States. I have vivid childhood memories of my father – not a big America fan – forbidding products such as Coca Cola and Mickey Mouse comics at home. I also remember occasional visits from his siblings, both of whom had emigrated to North America, one to California, one to Montreal. They always carried some fancy merchandise or a novel game in their luggage as gifts for my sisters and myself, which we then paraded among our friends.

A few years later, when my political conscience was being awakened, a former Hollywood actor was governing the country and the US was meddling with the affairs of several – admittedly left-leaning – Latin American countries. So when some of my college peers decided to do their study-abroad time in the USA, I was determined to travel to the other side of the globe to China, not least because I wished to see and learn about a country that I considered to be completely different from anything I ever had experienced before.

It was only at a later stage of my life that my interest in America was kindled. In the summer of 2004, I met R. in my favorite café in L., my adopted hometown. I didn’t like him at first. He was of the corpulent type, drinking shots and beer at the same time and talking loudly in American English. “Typical,” I thought. But he insisted, and soon I discovered a person behind the stereotype who had some interesting stories to tell about his home country and his life in Michigan. About three quarters of a year later, I was ready for a change and a new challenge, and I also desired to get to know R. better. I handed in my resignation at work and applied for a graduate program at Michigan State University. And behold! I was not only accepted, but was offered a generous scholarship.

Getting used to life in Lansing/East Lansing was more difficult than I had anticipated. Despite beautiful and warm end-of-summer and fall weather and friendly classmates,
I felt lonely and alien. My romantic involvement with R. had turned sour, which did not help my state of mind and heart. I had forgotten how hard and time-consuming it is to find new markings for oneself, to adjust to novel surroundings and to make new friends. In hindsight, I believe this is a blessing in disguise. If we always fully remembered the difficulties of adjustment, we would not dare making another move again.

R. used to marvel about how wonderful it was to 'hit the road' in the United States, how liberating a feeling it was to jump in the car and to traverse the country aimlessly listening to good music. He even offered me *On the road* by Beat generation icon Jack Kerouac on my birthday, a compelling, if somewhat strenuous description of adolescent life in America during the turbulent sixties. Having grown up in a family that did not own a car as long as I can remember and living in a country where public transport is at its best, I dismissed his ravings as juvenile. Imagine my surprise when one morning a couple of months after my arrival in Michigan, while driving into the morning sun on Saginaw Road towards East Lansing and school, I felt a compelling urge to turn right onto US 127 and drive South without purpose …

Some foreigners complain that American people seem superficial. I remember one encounter with an American tourist during my Eurorail travels in my late teens, who, after having been quite nice to me, wished me “a good life” instead of saying good bye, and was never seen or heard again. I am still taken aback when a waiter in a restaurant wants to know how I have been feeling that day before he takes my order. Meanwhile, I have learned not to reply with a long litany about how bad it has been or what a wonderful time I had doing this or that, but to respond simply with “great, thanks!” Another habit I had to get used to was the hugging. Back home, we usually do not get so close so fast (as a matter of fact, I had to get used to the kissing-the-
cheek-three-times in my adopted hometown, too!).

In her book *Beyond chocolate – understanding Swiss culture* (talk about stereotypes!), Margaret Oertig-Davidson uses the model of *Peach and Coconut* as a metaphor to explain the differences in the way people from Switzerland and from the US communicate. Peach cultures (i.e. the USA) are soft and fuzzy on the outside, colorful, sweet and juicy and have a hard pit in the middle. Coconut societies (i.e. Switzerland), on the other hand, are hard and hairy on the outside, but liquid and sweet in the center.

According to this model, peach individuals are extroverted with strangers (yep, just like R.), open and curious and make “friends” quickly. Coconuts, however, are more reserved and need time to warm up with strangers (just like me!). However, once you get beneath the hard shell, you have found a friend for life. Of course, peaches can be found in Switzerland and coconuts in the United States. Nevertheless, I have found this model to be useful for getting beyond the stereotypes I am guilty of as often as everyone else, and to understand the other person as coming from a different place, carrying a different story with its own meaning and value.

The point of going somewhere else is to have one’s value system challenged by the assumptions and values of others. The journey is arduous and can be discomforting at times. However, each occasion I have been abroad, I have found the experiences, delights and enlightments so abundant and enriching that they easily overcome the inevitable moments of loneliness, pain and melancholy that accompany every voyage.

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