



She fell for the charms of the French capital as a teenager and now more than a decade later, Canadian expat **April Pett** has made herself at home in the City of Light and has been inspired to start her own business there too

I suppose you could say that I've always craved adventure. My mom and nonna took me to Venice for my first birthday – I believe that's when it all began. Sure, maybe I was too young to really know what was happening or where I actually was, but I am convinced that this single event in my young life was responsible for sparking my wanderlust.

At the age of four, I started studying Italian. My hometown of Thorold in Ontario has a large Italian population, and as much as I would try to resist, my mom would get me in the car every Saturday morning and take me to Italian school. This went on for 10 years. Couldn't I be like the normal kids, sat in front of the TV watching my Saturday morning cartoons? Little did I know how much I would benefit from this weekly routine in the years to come (mothers always know best, as the saying goes).

When the time came to learn French at the age of nine, it came almost naturally to me. The rules of conjugation and pronouns almost all followed the same pattern. Masculine versus feminine nouns – easy! I liked to believe I was a natural born linguist and when the opportunity



arose to travel to France at the age of 17, I happily jumped at the chance. I packed my suitcase and grabbed my shiny new passport, and along with about a dozen other students from my high school, excitedly boarded the plane. Next stop: Paris.

### City of love

My very first memory of Paris is exiting the Métro into Place de la Concorde. My eyes grew wider and wider at the sight of the grand buildings, the glimmer of the fountains and the buzz of the city surrounding me. Those memories of group photos at Trocadéro with the Eiffel Tower looming in the background, horse-drawn carriages along the cobblestone streets and the iconic red windmill of the Moulin Rouge will forever be embedded in my memory. Never did I imagine that a decade later, I would call this beautiful city home.

I continued to study French and Italian at Brock University, which presented me with another opportunity to spend time abroad, and this time for an entire year. So I packed my bags again, eager to set off on my travels, but this time I couldn't simply pick up my passport and go. The decision to go abroad for such a



lengthy amount of time came with a generous amount of paperwork for student visas, loans and proof of accommodation. I had papers coming out of my ears and I felt I was in over my head. It was then that my nonna suggested I apply for a European Union passport on the basis of my Italian heritage.

At that time, Canadians were eligible to apply for Italian citizenship up to three generations back, so all that was needed was for my mom to also apply and *voilà*, off to Europe I could go. Of course, nothing was as simple as it sounded, but after weeks of meetings at the Italian Embassy in Toronto and even more files and forms, my application was submitted and approved, and finally, at last, off to Europe I went.

I spent the first four months of this new adventure living in Italy where I studied Italian Renaissance art and worked on a translation project for my uncle's company. Before starting school in the south of France, I backpacked

around Europe, visiting eight wonderful countries, making new memories and friends. In September, I said *arrivederci* to Italy and with two heavy suitcases in tow, I arrived at the student residence in Perpignan.

That year was one of the best years of my life. I dived headfirst into the French culture and revelled in it: the food, the music, the literature and history. French cheese, baguettes and pastries were all at my fingertips. I enjoyed my classes through the Centre Universitaire d'Études Françaises, a job at a local bar and weekends at the beach, in the mountains or across the border in Barcelona. I had amazing friends, I learned to cook and my French was improving daily. The world was my oyster filled with the shiniest, most precious pearls.

### Back to the future

However, all good things must come to an end. The tears flowed freely as I packed up my dorm room and bid *au revoir* to my dear friends and classmates. Now, 10 years later, I find myself settled in my cosy apartment atop the hills of Belleville, enjoying the view over the never-ending skyline of Parisian rooftops from my terrace. As an expat in Paris, I am often asked how I came to live in the City of Light.

After my studies I returned home and settled into a 9-5 job, but while this was a great experience and my family were pleased to have me back, I was craving adventure. After three years of the corporate lifestyle, I was ready to indulge my wanderlust once more. This time I had my sights set on Australia, and while I absolutely loved living Down Under, there was not a whole lot of opportunity to use my language skills. In fact, if anything, I lost much of the French that I spent years fine-tuning, so I found myself packing my bags again, and this time Paris was calling.

The research I'd done beforehand on the housing market and renting in Paris had prepared me for even more paperwork, a lack of apartments, unreasonable rent prices and unscrupulous rental agencies and landlords. I even heard rumours that some apartments were as small as nine square metres, perhaps even smaller. And while I have seen many expat friends and colleagues struggle to find suitable accommodation in the city, I certainly lucked out. I found my apartment through word of mouth; a girl, now roommate, was leaving Paris for the summer and was looking to sublet her room. I had only visited two other apartments before finding my Parisian home and as soon as I saw it, I knew in my heart it was the one for me. The whole renting process wasn't as daunting as I had anticipated either, or perhaps I simply got lucky.

My initial plan was to come back to France to improve my French and enrol on a Masters programme at the Sorbonne, but when I started working for an American tour company in Paris I realised I'd found my real passion. Coming from the Niagara region in Canada and living a somewhat nomadic life, I spent many summers working in hospitality and tourism. Paris was now home for me and I thrived on showing tourists around the city that I fell more and more in love with each day.

### Leap of faith

Last year I turned 30. While some people fall apart at the seams when approaching the big 3-0, I only felt more inspired than ever. While I loved working for the tour company and appreciate the opportunities it gave me, it was time, yet again, to set off on my own. I wasn't relocating this time though because Paris was now home, but I was looking for a bigger challenge. And that's when I decided to start my own tour company. This was the beginning of a new chapter in my life, and it was exactly where I wanted to be. Finally, after nearly 30 years of life, of travel and of soul-searching, it had all come together. I had found my calling.

It was an enormous leap of faith, leaving my job that brought in a guaranteed income to pay for the roof over my head and put food on my table. But I was confident that my business plan could work. With all of the positive feedback from the many tourists that I already guided through Paris, surely my venture could be a success.

As I sat at my desk and stared at my blank screen on day one, I didn't even know where to begin. The panic began to set in. Was I crazy? I took a deep breath and began to brainstorm. Dozens of ideas poured out on to the screen. But, while I had many great ideas and an extensive knowledge of Paris, there were many factors that I hadn't taken into consideration.

That's when it all began; the endless calls, messages and emails as friends from near and far reached out to extend a hand to help with web design, graphic design, marketing strategies, social media, photography – the list goes on and on. This was a whole new world for me and I felt (and continue to feel)

overwhelmed with gratitude for those who offered their help and support. Before I knew it, my website was up and running, I had partners across the city and a purse full of business cards. It was all really happening now; I was a young entrepreneur!

Last summer proved to be successful. Tourists were pouring into Paris from all corners of the globe. Strolling along the city's charming streets, I happily guided these new friends through the rich history, delicious food, trendy fashions and beautiful language of the capital of France. Every day was a dream come true. After the horrifying events of November occurred, tourism came to a halt for weeks. I remember thinking to myself, would I ever have a tour request again? But with time, the magic of Paris has lured people back. And while tourism has surely suffered, people haven't been put off.

Today the sun is shining as people hurry to and fro. As I walk down the street, I see the way people gaze in admiration at the Eiffel Tower and Notre-Dame. As I walked through the Louvre just yesterday, I couldn't help but smile as a daughter posed excitedly as her father took photos. This could be the beginning of wanderlust for her as well, I thought. That was me once, the girl in her shoes, that day I emerged from the Parisian Métro for the first time. The wide-eyed teenager April is still with me, and with every corner I turn I discover something new and exciting; and every day I continue to fall hopelessly in love with Paris. ■

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