

Amanda Starkey

Article : Gap Year

December 2016

My Year Abroad

If there is anything I've learned about life from the last four months I have spent in France, it's that sometimes you can't plan your future, and that sometimes it's better that way. My name is Amanda Starkey, I am 18 years old and I am currently living in France for what I guess can be called a "gap year". Many people have asked me why I decided to do this, and frankly it's quite a long story.

At the beginning of my senior year of high school, I knew exactly where I wanted to be after graduation. Let me just say, it was nothing close to where I am now. I planned on attending a university that is only a 30 minute drive away from my family home in the small town of Luray, Virginia. I was preparing to study dance and music, participate in the school's competitive dance team and find a job that would pay for tuition, all while staying close to my home and family. If someone tried to tell me then that I would end up studying independently and spending a year in France, I wouldn't have believed them for a second. But senior year went by fast and a lot of things changed, and when I got that letter of rejection from my dream school I felt that my entire future was ruined.

Right around this time, my dad's business partners from France came to visit Virginia for a few days on a business trip. A few years ago, my dad took on a project of importing a small brand of champagne into the United States, and it wasn't until just recently that the business began to succeed. I didn't think very much of it at the time since my dad has business partners from all over the world, so even when they proposed that I could stay with them for a year I never considered it a possibility. Weeks went by, and it wasn't until just before graduation that I realized I needed to make a decision. I wanted to stay home, work a job and save up enough money to attend a good university for the following year, but something was telling me that this chance I had to travel and study in another part of the world was too great of an opportunity to miss. I also worried that if I didn't go now then I never would, and I wasn't going to spend my life dreaming of something that would never become a reality.

So, I graduated high school and worked a part-time job over the summer and signed up for online community college classes for the fall semester while preparing for my year abroad. I didn't let myself think about leaving too much because I knew I would get scared and talk myself out of it. The summer went by fast, and on August 21st, I flew out of the Dulles Airport and landed in Paris the next

day. It was only two weeks later that I began classes at Lycée de Crézancy, where I have met amazing people and learned things about France's culture that I never could have otherwise (while also taking online classes and working with dad's business partners). The phrase "culture shock" is a bit of an understatement to me, because moving to France meant not only learning the nation's culture (and language), but also the culture of Europe as a whole. Seeing this whole other place that is still so new to me and comparing the similarities and differences to what I'm used to has really opened my eyes to what it truly means to be a part of the world. Leaving home and changing my surroundings has also taught me a lot about myself, and I feel more confident in who I am because changing my life has left me with only the parts of myself that are not influenced by anyone's opinions, which I think is a huge part of growing up and deciding who you want to be. When I return to America, I still plan to attend a university, but I intend on now studying business, and hopefully finding a way to incorporate dance and music into a future business career.

Even though my experience isn't even halfway over, I have already learned so much. I think that everyone should experience being foreign at least once, because traveling the world opens your eyes and teaches you to think in ways you never would have even thought to before. So I encourage every young person who wants to find out who they are to go somewhere new for a little while; there is simply too much in this world to only know one little part of it.