

# At home

# BEING AN EXPAT



*Self-confessed Eurostar dad, David Willows reflects on ten years of 'inbetween' life.*

Catching the Eurostar at London's Waterloo Station back in the winter of 2001, with nothing more than a bag of wishful thinking, I could hardly have imagined the story that was about to unfold. I was, after all, a most unlikely adventurer, who'd rarely travelled away from the comforts of my very British home. In fact, I was 17 when I first travelled abroad and 30 when I took my first trip to France and Belgium.

A decade and 500 crossings of La Manche later, I'm left thinking how the story has changed me and my view on what's important, what's not, and what it means to be truly at home. So let's start on the outside and work towards the centre.

## AT HOME WITH MY NEIGHBOURS

I used to say that expatriates were people running away from something, but now I'm not so sure. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that the act of living 'away from home' is a positive embrace or running towards a different way of life, enriched by the contrasting beliefs, stories and traditions of new neighbours.



In ten years, I've been fortunate enough to have some great neighbours, some of whom have graduated into friends, celebrated with us and stayed alongside us in times of trouble. To be sure, I've left the relative comfort of a place where everyone speaks the same language, everyone eats at the same restaurant, and everyone furnishes their home in the same way. Sameness can certainly make us feel secure for a time; but I'd swap my old life for my life now every single time I hear my children talking about diwali, asking to go to a sushi restaurant, or proudly demonstrating their knowledge of Swahili.



*Summer evenings on the Grand Place*

**David Willows'** latest book is *Fragments: Stories and Reflections On Modern Family Life* (Createspace, 2010). Visit [davidwillows.com](http://davidwillows.com) or [dkwillows@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:dkwillows@yahoo.co.uk)

### AT HOME WITH MY FAMILY

If expatriate life is about embracing diversity and celebrating difference, I've also discovered that it forces a daily 'letting go' – beginning with the realisation that I am never quite in control of even the most ordinary of situations; never quite fluent enough in the languages or nuances of this complex state; never quite enough

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'one of them' to feel that my voice really counts.

It's not just that, though. It's also the fact that, with kids of my own on both sides of the Channel, I am always torn. I've become a Eurostar dad, always travelling, always somehow in between – with a hello and a goodbye at both ends of the journey.

They say that we are only truly at home when we are with our family. For me, though, the story of being an expatriate has been full of tension –

being at home, but only ever in part: family life in fragments.

### AT HOME WITH MYSELF

It's a cliché, I know, but sometimes a cliché actually captures what we're trying to tell. A decade ago, I embarked upon an adventure and could hardly have imagined where it was to take me, the people I was going to meet, and the life I was to build for myself away from what I once consider home.

Of course, the experience has changed me and my view on the way things are. I have begun to understand that I am never quite in control of any situation; that I will perhaps always be an 'inbetween', journeying both physically and emotionally between two worlds; and that there's a certain messiness, chaos, or risk attached to being an expat these days, where various aspects of our lives never quite fit as neatly together as we would hope.

That said, even if it is messier, more challenging, and more fragmented, I've come to feel at home with all this stuff and probably wouldn't have it any other way.

And I strongly suspect that most of you would say the same.

