



*outsider*

# AU REVOIR

*The Fashion Outsider goes to Paris and has an epiphany*

*'Pardonnez-moi, parlez-vous Anglais?'*

For the young woman who'd stopped me on the Pont Neuf to pose this question, I had good news and bad news. Yes, I *parle Anglais* – indeed, I *parle* little else. But I'd been in Paris not quite 14 hours, and my own hopes of reaching the Sainte-Chapelle (my early-morning destination) rested solely upon keeping sight of its spindly tower jutting above the Palais de Justice up ahead.

So *pardonnez-moi* for being no use whatsoever, but *merci bien* for mistaking the Fashion Outsider for a natural-born Parisienne.

It was unexpected, to say the least. I'd travelled to Paris, resigned to the idea that a fashion outsider in Cape Town was doomed to be a fashion outcast in the capital of couture and the croissant. I believed it even now. For never mind that underneath my borrowed Jil Sander trench there was a Christopher Strong shirt-dress flapping in the breeze – if you live on the fringe of fashion long enough, you know it takes more than a couple of on-loan labels to disguise a lifetime of sartorial insecurity. Just like the bird in borrowed feathers in the Aesop fable, the risk of being recognised as an intruder remains always present.

But if it wasn't my fashionability that had fooled the *petite Americaine* into expecting a little local savoir-faire, it had to be something else.

Perhaps it was that I travelled alone. Although I could impress no-one with my French, of which I have less than a smattering, being on my own meant that I also didn't involuntarily 'out' myself by conducting loud conversations in *Anglais*.

Unless I chose

to give the game away by begging a French waiter for milk in my coffee, it was possible to silently belong.

I did, therefore, concede some of my insider status when my sister arrived from the Limousin region and we toured Montmartre *a deux* – but I gained it right back when we scoured a hardware store for the hand tools required to maintain her rustic lifestyle in a medieval village a three-hour train ride from there. Being an outsider must run in families: if it didn't, surely we'd have made a beeline for Colette instead? Still, it struck me as a very insider thing to do – buying a spanner in Paris.

Tumbling the shirt-dress in the Miele dryer later that night I wondered if perhaps it was that, instead of a hotel room, I had at my disposal an entire floor in the 6th *arrondissement*, where I only had to tap in a five-digit code for the ancient front door to admit me with a welcoming insider click. Hotels make outsiders of us all, but a velvet-clad stairway above the Sonia Rykiel store in Saint-Germain-des-Prés I could emulate the life of a Parisienne. Frowning over the fresh produce at La Grande Epicerie – 7.90 euro for asparagus? *Mon Dieu!* – is very insider too...

It is insiders who create outsiders. The one can't exist without the other and the power to exclude belongs entirely to a self-selected inner circle, never the other way around. This thought struck me so unexpectedly and with such force on day two that I was compelled to compose myself on a small chair outside the brasserie on the corner of the Rue du Sèvres and the Boulevard Raspail. Ordering a six-euro glass of wine the better to contemplate this new insight, I was surrounded by the evidence of a tolerant society, one that is remarkably generous about sharing the world's most beautiful city with young children, small dogs, tourists and, yes (as I leant forward to share a match with a passer-by), even smokers.

Paris streetstyle may be a worldwide obsession, but it doesn't seem so to Parisians, much. In fact – and this was the Fashion Outsider's epiphany – there's no city more likely to make you forget what you're wearing.

The Sainte-Chapelle will serve as a case in point: 600 square metres of stained glass for which the gothic brick structure provides nothing but the most delicate framework. Paris has been looking after this fragile treasure (and countless others) for over 700 years, painstakingly removing the magnificent glass panels during World War II and replacing them when the war ended.

With so much to take care of, Paris has far too much on its mind to exclude people from its inner circle – and if you think about it, so do most women. And so does a magazine like ELLE. Which brings me to the point in the story where the Fashion Outsider orders another six-euro glass of wine.

And calls it quits. □

*The Fashion Outsider's Paris address was a luxury apartment on the Rue des Saints-Pères from the portfolio of Haven in Paris, specialists in short-term rentals in Paris and Provence. Pick your holiday address at [haveninparis.com](http://haveninparis.com)*