

the last word

A LIBRARY PROFESSIONAL'S HOLIDAY

As a passionate librarian, even when she's on holiday from her day job, Helen Kwaka finds new libraries difficult to ignore (much to the chagrin of her traveling companion). The opportunity to explore the famous and not so famous libraries is too enticing.

My overseas holidays have included visits to famous libraries such as the Library of Congress, New York Public Library, Seattle Public Library, Boston Library, and The British Library.

In addition to the attraction of these popular tourist destinations, public libraries have enabled access to the internet to keep connected with my family and friends. I prefer them to soulless, tourist-filled, dingy internet cafes.

Public libraries also offer the added bonuses of being able to read the local papers, taking a refreshment stop, and asking for directions when absolutely desperate. Being a bit of a shutterbug (I have more than ten thousand photos on Flickr), I like to take photos inside libraries, as a record of what I've seen.

Sometimes I have used the, "Oh, I work in an Australian library" card. After talking about differences and similarities between countries, the local staff have been very obliging.

While these public library experiences benefit all ordinary travellers, the visits are also professional development opportunities. Like all library professionals, no matter where I am in the world, I have found our overseas colleagues to be passionate and willing to share information and experiences, although, without a phrasebook in non-English speaking countries, even getting into a public library with members-only access and requesting to take photos is challenging, as I have experienced in Korea, China, Japan and Malaysia.

Here are few amusing experiences relating to libraries I've had over the last ten years, as a result of everything from pre-planning to completely random events:

- Exploring the famous Seattle Public Library on an architectural tour with 'wayfinding professionals' (aka graphic designers). Our conversation continued beyond the tour to a shared dinner, providing an interesting insight into their business and work in American libraries.
- Enjoying an authentic Mexican dinner in LA with a volunteer on an American Library Association committee. We discovered the tribulations and desires about the library profession are the same the world over.

- In Delhi after much red tape, while on a pre-arranged tour of the parliamentary library, the hard-working staff shared their morning tea snacks with us. Our 'Indian fixer' joined us for tour as he had never been inside the parliament building.
- Purchasing a library bag at the Boston library involved exercise. I followed a staff member to three locations over two floors, all within the same building. Thankfully they did have a bag!
- On a west coast road trip in America, we stopped at the Langlois Public Library for a brief road stop to check maps, and have some refreshments. I walked away with a library t-shirt, having also learnt about their role in promoting gun safety in the local community (they have gun locks readily available on the front counter).

Next time you go on holiday, and walk past a library don't ignore the sign - walk inside and discover what the library has available. As I write this I'm currently on holiday in Europe looking forward to seeing libraries in Copenhagen and Amsterdam. What libraries will you visit on your next holiday?

Helen Kwaka
helen.kwaka@cttg.sa.gov.au

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