

My Impressions of Working in a Foreign Country: Brooklyn, New York

By Marcella Ade



Marcella Ade

Marcella (Marcy) Ade originally hails from the Philadelphia suburbs. The fifth child of Italian immigrant parents, Marcy is a first generation American from a family that maintained close cultural ties to the world they left behind.

After completing high school in Ardmore, PA, Marcy deferred her entrance to college for one year to travel and work throughout Europe. At the conclusion of that year, Marcy was accepted into St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia, where she earned a B.A. degree.

While in her senior year at St. Joseph's University, Marcy was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to live and study in Vienna, Austria. A graduate fellowship to the University of Pennsylvania, where she earned an M.A., and a graduate scholarship to attend Neyenrode University in Breukelen, Holland, round out Marcy's educational credentials.

Marcy speaks several foreign languages fluently and has worked as an administrator in the healthcare field for the past 10 years. She is married and resides with her husband in Yarmouth, Maine.

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My journey to Brooklyn started with a phone call. In April 2012, Kay from Birmingham, Alabama, called to tell me with a voice as sweet as sugar that she had come across my résumé and that I would be absolutely perfect for a new assignment at their company. Athenahealth needed an account manager to represent them in a brand new market area, someone with the experience necessary to work directly with hospital CEOs and senior leadership to manage their accounts, someone who could grow their business from non-existent to profitable. Athenahealth had just acquired this account and they needed someone to start immediately. Would I be willing to move to Brooklyn, New York? And, if yes, how soon could I start?

Brooklyn? Manhattan I knew. My every prior trip to New York was limited to Manhattan. The only people who really visit all five boroughs are the New York City Marathon runners. Like millions of other tourists, leaving Manhattan and crossing the bridge to Brooklyn was never on my agenda, even though I have a nephew who lives in Park Slope. They really wanted me to live and work in Brooklyn? Images of brownstone houses and pizza and Jewish bakeries and Barbra Streisand singing "Don't Rain on my Parade" flashed through my mind. Oh, I also thought about the tree that grows in Brooklyn and about Asher Lev and other books about Brooklyn. Didn't Ralph Kramden, famously played by Jackie Gleason in *The Honeymooners*, live in Brooklyn? Maybe Frank Sinatra wasn't thinking of Manhattan but of Brooklyn when he said, "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere." I could

make it there, I thought. So, in a New York minute, I told Kay "Yes!" All I needed to do now was pack my bags. Little did I know at the time that I would soon be living and working in a foreign country.

I should mention that I am not an expert on all things Brooklyn. This paper is not based on years of scholarly research, but on personal experience. Perhaps you, dear reader, have more extensive knowledge about Brooklyn. Maybe you were born there, or have lived and worked in Brooklyn yourself—one thing I do know about Brooklynites is that they carry Brooklyn in their hearts long after they leave its soil. Rich and poor, famous and infamous, newcomers and old timers all share a deep-seated love for this culturally rich, uniquely fun, fashionably hip corner of the world called Brooklyn. All I know is that the moment you cross the Brooklyn Bridge and see the sign, "Welcome to Brooklyn, How Sweet It Is," you've entered another country—or, one could even say, several different countries.

Brooklyn, New York, was named after Breukelen, Holland—a tidy bit of trivia I had stored in my head since attending Neyenrode University, located in Breukelen, on a scholarship in 1980. The Dutch connection made sense, since New York had been colonized by the Dutch and named Nieuw Amsterdam, but it wasn't until I arrived in Brooklyn, New York, to live and work that I started to get a better perspective on Brooklyn's historical evolution from a pastoral retreat for weary Manhattan residents to the

largest of the five New York City boroughs. The Brooklyn Historical Society website (www.brooklynhistory.org) provides a helpful overview of how Brooklyn developed to be one of the “World’s Coolest New Tourist Attractions,” according to *Travel + Leisure* magazine (Graham). A quick glance at Brooklyn census data fills in the blanks:

1790 – 4,495 people (3,017 white; 1,478 African)

2000 – 2,475,290 people

2010 – 2,504,700 people, of which 926,511 (37%) are foreign born

Brooklyn is a city of neighborhoods. Because I needed to be close to my work at Maimonides Medical Center, I selected an apartment in the Sunset Park section. On my first night in my ground floor apartment, with my windows wide open to let in the summer breezes, I was abruptly awakened from a deep sleep to the sound of two people walking past my window speaking Chinese. In my darkened room, in a neighborhood still unknown to me, I lay paralyzed in bed and wondered, “Where am I? What am I doing here? Are the Chinese people here in my apartment? Am I in America?” That sense of complete disorientation—being in a strange apartment with no familiar surroundings, being in a new city with new sights and sounds, and being surrounded by people who don’t speak English, when I thought I was in America—was only amplified in the middle of the night. I turned on the light and looked at my suitcases still lying on the floor—“Oh, right. I’m here in Brooklyn and I start work tomorrow. The doors are locked and I’m safe, but I better shut the windows.” That was the first of many nights to follow where I was awakened by sounds of Chinese and Spanish outside my window.

Walk a few blocks in Brooklyn and

you cross not only streets, but country borders.

Jennifer Purtill, who represents Brooklyn Tourism, tells inquiring travelers that [...] “Brooklyn is like a mini-Europe. The Borough is made up of over 50 neighborhoods with dozens of ethnicities and backgrounds. You can walk from one cobblestone street to the next exploring goods, cuisine, and entertainment and experience the intrinsic culture significant to each community similar to traveling from country to country in Europe.” (Wynne)

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Sunset Park, where I lived, was, at one time, predominantly Norwegian:

The large population of Finns, Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians in Sunset Park harkens back to more than 300 years ago when the area was a key shipping port. The Scandinavian community was at its height as late as the 1960s. (Ap)

Today, however, Sunset Park is the largest ethnic Chinese community in the city (Ap). Walking down 8th Avenue to buy groceries or a newspaper, you are surrounded by people of

all ages speaking Chinese. The shop owners may or may not speak English, so I often resorted to pointing to the item that I wanted, and we communicated in a modified form of sign language, just as if I were shopping in Shanghai or Hong Kong.

Early every morning, the Chinese gather in Sunset Park, at the summit of the hill overlooking Manhattan, and practice Tai Chi. The buildings surrounding the park are pure Brooklyn Brownstone, and the view is pure New York—you can even see the Statue of Liberty in the harbor—but the scene is pure China. The people practicing Tai Chi and speaking Chinese on any given morning in Sunset Park outnumber the inhabitants of Greater Portland, Maine. And unlike Portland, Maine, where population growth is slowing, their numbers are increasing—lots of babies, lots of young children, and lots of parents and grandparents living, working, and speaking Chinese in this little enclave of China in America. These are the new immigrants and one can only assume that this generation of immigrants, like the wave of European immigrants that came to this country in the early 20th Century, will eventually assimilate and span out from this section of Brooklyn in the years to come. Sunset Park, Brooklyn, is the first step in their immigration process and for them an important cultural center.

Walk a few blocks from 8th Avenue, and you arrive in Borough Park, “A thriving community of traditional family values,” according to a promotional poster (Wallace). In a community of over 100,000 people packed into 200 blocks, storefronts advertise in Hebrew because Hebrew, not English, is the dominant language of the people. Over 80% of the residents in Borough Park are Orthodox and Hasidic Jews, the neighborhood boasting the highest concentration of Jews living in one area outside of Israel. Sidewalks bustle with men in earlocks,

black coats, and hats, and women in wigs or kerchiefs and long dresses and sleeves. There are over 200 synagogues, and children are everywhere—the average is seven per family (Wallace). At Maimonides Medical Center, which is a Jewish teaching hospital located in Borough Park, over 7,000 babies are born every year, and these birth numbers are from just one hospital out of many in Brooklyn, most of which have bustling maternity wings. Walking through Borough Park is like walking down the streets of Old City, Jerusalem. When my husband and I walked into a Jewish bakery in Borough Park to buy Seven Layer Cake, the heavenly aroma of the fresh baked breads and pastries nearly knocked us off our feet. You can get fat just breathing the air in a Jewish bakery! I wish we could get a good bagel or a Seven Layer Cake in Maine! For delights like these, though, we would have to travel to Borough Park.

Not far from Borough Park is Brighton Beach, also known as Little Russia. The playwright Neil Simon wrote about a different Brighton Beach experience in his *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, set in 1937. Today, Brighton Beach is predominantly a community of Eastern Europeans, many of whom emigrated here after 1970 (Sell). The language on the streets and in the stores is Russian, not English. In Brighton Beach as in the other neighborhoods of Brooklyn, the new waves of immigrants arrive speaking the language of their home country, settle in neighborhoods where their family and countrymen reside, and continue the traditions from their home country. Then after a generation or two, these new immigrants assimilate completely into mainstream America, often outside the city of Brooklyn. Every immigrant has hopes and dreams of one day becoming successful—this is the story of America.

The last Brooklyn neighborhood that I would like to describe to you is

Bay Ridge, locally referred to as “Beirut.” Bay Ridge is where the story of Tony Manero, the character played by John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*, unfolded. Once predominantly Italian, Bay Ridge now hosts a significant Muslim population. The Italians still have a stronghold in Bay Ridge, but there has been a huge migration of Middle Easterners to this particular neighborhood. Based on my own impressions and observations, The Muslim community in Bay Ridge does not seem keen on assimilating into American society, and they prefer to keep themselves very much apart from the communities that surround them.

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New mosques are popping up everywhere, and Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages can be heard on the busses, on the streets, and in the stores. The Muslim population of Bay Ridge is growing. Where are the Tony Maneros of the world now? They’ve moved to Staten Island, just over the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, where you can still

meet a nice Italian girl and take her out for a slice of pizza.

Living and working in Brooklyn has been fabulous in so many ways. In my job, I interacted daily with Russians, Chinese, Orthodox Jews, Italians, Hispanics, and, oh, a few more familiar kinds of Americans. My greatest challenge, however, was not in working with this culturally diverse population, but with my own colleagues in Alabama. Suffice it to say, my “American” colleagues do not always understand Brooklyn and how things work here. Most Americans from other parts of the country do not do a whole lot better, for that matter. To succeed in Brooklyn, you have to work fast, be upfront and honest, and always deliver on your promises. And if you make a mistake, admit it, quickly, and make it right, right away. That’s the Brooklyn way. Brooklyn is the best. I didn’t know when they asked me to work here that I would end up loving it so much. Leave Brooklyn, Fuhgeddaboutit!

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