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Opinion

Guest View: Bigger is not always better, and other thoughts on U.S. v Europe



Dan Franch

By Dan Franch Guest columnist

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I returned to the suburbs in August. It was my third time back to the U.S. this year.

This time it was to drop off our son at university.

The other two times were for holiday reasons and my dad's 90th birthday.

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I live in Europe, or "over there" as some like to say. Others, like the man we once met in a coffee shop in New York City, liked to reference Europe as "The Old World." I always get a kick out of that antiquated expression.



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I've been living outside of the U.S. since 2000; in Europe mostly, but in Africa,

too. I also traveled quite a bit when I was younger. I've come in and gone out of the U.S. almost as many times as I am years old. That's 55.

My first time out of the U.S. was when I was 5. We went to visit my mom's parents in Italy. My next time back in the U.S. will be this December for my mom's 85th birthday.

Each time I return, I see it in a new way; the good, the bad, the ugly ... and the beautiful.

To paraphrase the British writer Terry Pratchett, when people ask me why I've moved abroad, I reply, "So that I can come back."



In recent years, every time I come back to the U.S. I enjoy it even more, seeing more of the good and beautiful. But that wasn't always the case.

I remember my first return to the U.S. after moving to Estonia, which is where I now live.

It was the summer of 2001, a couple of months before 9/11.

I was looking at the huge colorful cupcakes in the window display of some bakery in Manhattan. It was a bit of a surreal moment because Estonia at that time was just 10 years liberated from Soviet occupation, so things there were still rather gray.



This was a real "kid in a candy store" moment.

I bought the cupcake, bit into it, and immediately threw it in the trash.

The cupcake was dry and it had no flavor. In a flash, I was reminded of one of the "bads" about America.

We Americans have a reputation for being materialistic and thinking that bigger is better. Bigger houses. Bigger cars. Bigger portions. We even came up with the phrase "Supersize."



But bigger and brighter is not always better.

My cupcake experience attests to that, a small example of how looks can be deceiving.

In Europe, things are smaller. "Quaint" is an oft-used word. Take for example the WC, an abbreviation for the water closet. That's not the place where you

store bottles of water.

It's where the toilet is, and as the name suggests, it's not so unusual for the WC to be no bigger than a closet.



Here's another example, McDonald's **drink sizes in the U.S. vs the U.K.:**

In the U.S. a small is 16 ounces, medium is 21 and large is 32.

In the U.K., a small is 8.5 ounces and a large is 17 ounces, barely larger than a small American drink.

Houses, too, are bigger in the U.S. In 2017, the average U.S. house was 1,901 square feet. In France, it was 1,556. In Germany, 1,477.



Even **parking stalls are bigger** in America.

The standard size for all European parking stalls is 16 feet by 8 feet. For standard U.S. vehicles it's 18 feet by 8-foot-6.

I like America more and more each time I return.

Perhaps it's because, to quote the writer Louis L'Amour, "One who returns to a place sees it with new eyes."



That's me every time I return to my homeland. Each time, I seem to recognize something new, be it good, bad, ugly ... and/or beautiful.

- Dan Franch, franchdan@gmail.com, a former Peace Corps volunteer, grew up in Addison and left for good in 1998. He has traveled to more than 50 countries, starting with a backpacking adventure around the world for a year in 1991.