

LANGUAGE SCHOOL

Teaching English abroad can be a once-in-a-lifetime inroad to foreign climes without the expense of overseas travel. It could even point you down a totally different path, whether in your career or your personal life. **Words by Karen Glaser**

School trip to remember

My first proper boyfriend got back in touch just recently. Barely out of our teens, we vanished like smoke from each other's lives for almost 20 years, so when I saw his name in my email inbox, the shock was great.

The email itself was unsettling, too. Of course it was — missives from old flames always are. Yet my ex's most disquieting words were not about his new life and passions, but his depiction of my younger self: 'Good to hear you became a journalist as I remember you were unsure what to do with your life. The last time we spoke you were vaguely toying with TEFL.'

Toying with teaching English as a foreign language — I would like to protest, but I cannot. When I got a one-way ticket to Sicily in the early nineties, it was because I was feeling rudderless. My arts degree was followed by a full-time Masters, a competitive and insecure year during which I realised I wasn't cut out for academia.

Through the years I had talked about journalism, but it was a rather vague and apprehensive ambition born of little more than people saying I was good at stringing sentences together. I was utterly clueless about how I

might earn my living at it. Teaching abroad meant I could wallow in my cluelessness for a bit longer while appearing mildly purposeful.

It was, in short, a delaying tactic with a glamorous twist. After all, I wasn't going to be pulling pints or cleaning other people's loos. I was jetting off to the land of Fellini and the Vespa to teach. And given that most of my days had, at that point, been spent in education, I reckoned it couldn't be too hard to sit on the other side of the teaching fence.

It was largely on this arrogant basis that of all the towns in all the world I ended up in Catania, Sicily being one of the few places where you can teach English without a TEFL qualification. Arrogant indeed, and akin to the notion that if you

soak up enough novels, you can squeeze them out, too.

After two months teaching in a private language school, I felt pretty squeezed myself — flattened even. The hours were long, the pay was low and my students, the pampered offspring of Catania's well-heeled bourgeoisie, were singularly uninterested in learning my mother tongue. And with no teaching experience or qualification, I had no idea how to light their fuse.

Worst of all for my vain younger self, the don who ran the school had strict rules on how the young ladies he had brought over from London and housed in his various properties across the city should dress. His sartorial decrees included no trousers, no skirts above the

knees and no bare arms. Our Norland nanny-inspired look was central to the 'tea-at-four, quaint Little England' package he was selling to the gullible parents of our spoilt, Gucci-clad pupils.

It's an image of the UK that still has currency in the tens of thousands of places where Brits teach English today. The other week, for example, my friend's younger sister who teaches English in Namibia was asked if she would be returning to our temperate shores for 'Kate and Will's Big Day'.

It explains why radio and television presenter Wendy Robbins thoughtfully popped a few tea bags into her rucksack before she went off to teach English in Mexico's remote Yucatan peninsula. "I was the first native English speaker my students had met and they loved the fact I was 'English English' rather than, say, American. They were fascinated by the Royal Family," she recalls.

However, for me, pretending to be a 1950s schoolmistress was a suffocating sham that had to end. In those first few weeks in Catania, I built up an active social life. Lessons ended at 8pm, after which I ran home, got changed and hit the town

CASE STUDY: BOTSWANA

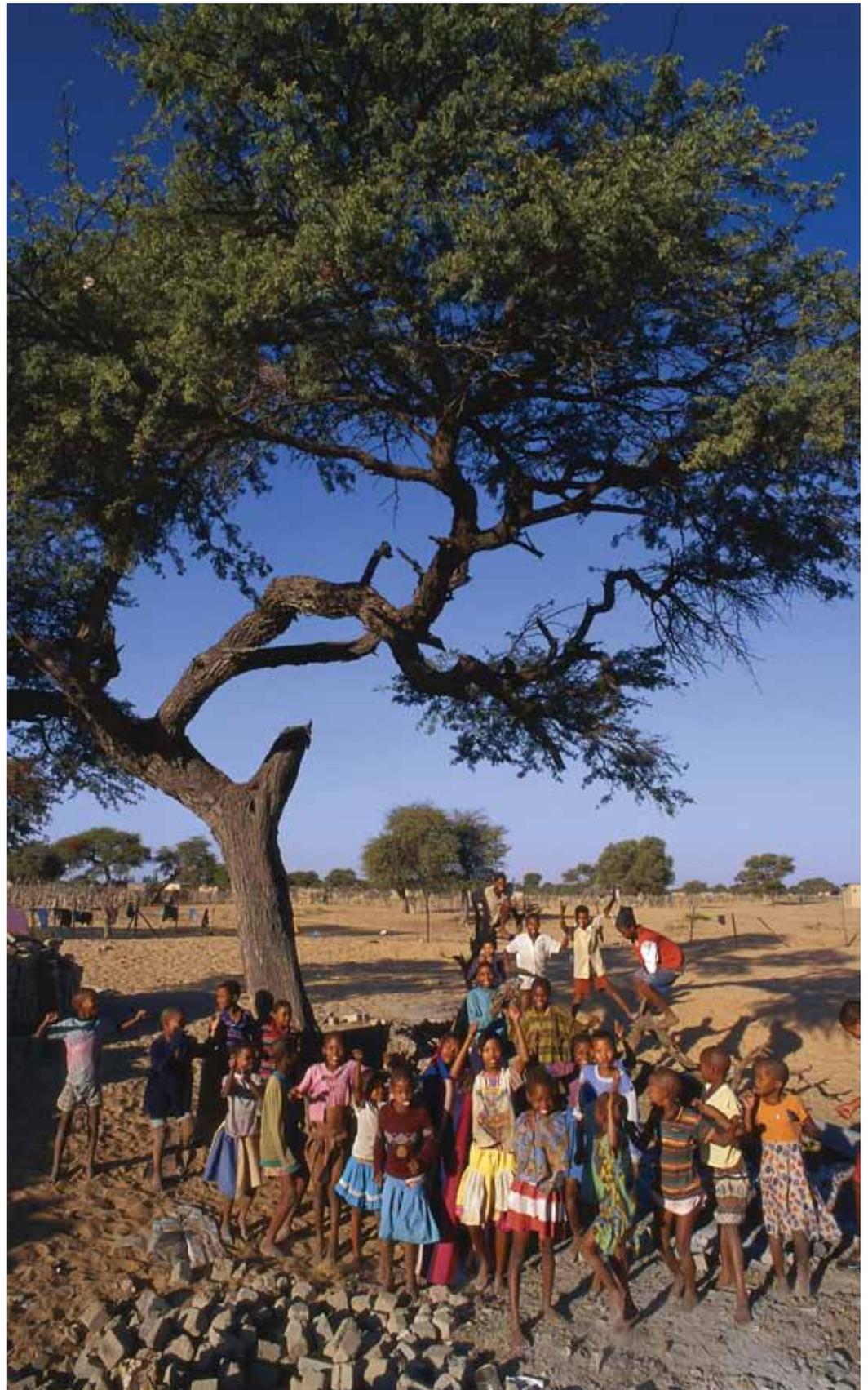


"If you get the opportunity to teach abroad at a young age, seize it. Your eyes are never that open again," says writer and painter Mark McCrum, 52. During his year at a multiracial school in Botswana, he set up a life-drawing class. Mark's resources were limited — 20 pencils, 20 pieces of hardboard and 20 rubbers — but by the time he left, the school was offering Art O Level. What did Mark learn? "People are the same the world over. Walk into any school and you'll soon find the specy one and the swaggering one."

— which included bar-hopping with some Brits who'd set up a rival language school, The Method. When my new friends offered me a job, I didn't hesitate and I absconded that night. Yes, absconded. The despotic don was not someone to whom you gave conventional notice.

Teaching English at The Method was certainly more relaxing, but I'm not sure I offered my students particularly good value for money. Although I believe teaching is essentially an instinctive profession, it still requires training for you to be really effective in the classroom. My only training was to have spoken English my entire life, so my lessons were often little more than hammy conversations.

Luckily for indolent and slightly ashamed me, this satisfied my pupils because, as any TEFL teacher will tell you, conversation with a real live Brit is the holy grail for wannabe English-speakers the world over. In the words of Marianne Hearder, who taught English in Brussels in her early twenties: "Having English as your mother tongue is a passport to >>



Right: Schoolchildren in Botswana



Right: Piazza Duomo, Catania

lifelong employment.” Another example, I guess, of the unfairness that is the accident of birth.

My classroom colloquialism also gave me piercing insights into Sicilian customs and practices; it hardly needs stating that learning first-hand about other cultures is the overriding pleasure and privilege of living abroad. One exchange, a role-play about buying ice cream, has stayed with me. Giovanni was the *barista* and yours truly was the customer.

Me: “Could I have a chocolate and strawberry ice cream, please?”

Him: “No.”

Me: “No?”

Him: “No, you canna hava chocolate with fruit. Is not digestible. I no serve you.”

For the record, Giovanni was deadly serious.

Then there were the individual lessons. If teaching groups of people intermediate English, to use TEFL parlance, for seven hours on the trot could get tedious, then interminable one-to-one chats about people’s families, pets and

their favourite gelato were often mind-numbing. And this is from someone who relishes small talk.

However, every so often there was some reprieve in the form of a student who was happy for his lessons to take place outside the classroom: in the furious outdoor market on the street below, at a bar, in the local bookshop — anywhere, as long as he was speaking English non-stop. I say ‘he’ because my saviour was invariably male and the little outings for an espresso, a *passeggiata* or a leisurely stroll were thinly disguised dates.

One day, a man called Francesco walked into my beginner’s class and the mutual attraction was immediate. And enduring. Although we recently separated, Francesco and I were together for 15 years and he is the father of my two children.

My story’s not unusual. When you’re young, unattached and overseas, liaisons are fun and easy to form. As Wendy Robbins knows only too well. She met her first love in Yucatan. Rach was an anthropology lecturer at the >>

CASE STUDY: JAPAN



Matthew Lister was a frustrated civil servant in York when, aged 26, he changed path and did a Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA). Japan appealed from the outset. Now a commercial analyst, the 36-year-old says his decision was spot-on. “It was a brilliant way of getting under the skin of another country without racking up debts.” And most importantly, he also met the girl who was to become his wife.

CASE STUDY: GREECE



Mother-of-three Meredith Bartlett, 43, was disappointed with her Greek adventure at an after-hours college for schoolchildren in Athens. “Greece was a bit of a mistake,” she admits. “I was looking for the thrill of the new, but the pay was so bad I couldn’t really go out and when I did, I found the locals unsophisticated and hard to engage with. I missed family and friends more than I had anticipated and after six months I came home.”

CASE STUDY: BELGIUM



When she set off for Brussels 16 years ago, account manager Marianne Header, 39, was “hungry for an adventure”. Within a couple of weeks she had a job with Berlitz, who trained her before letting her loose on the employees of upmarket banks and Berlitz schools across the city. “Brussels’ position at the heart of the EU meant that I was teaching people from across the world. I also learnt that I can talk to people from all walks of life.”

university where she had a placement to teach English for a year. Their intense relationship was heightened by a climate of sweltering heat, sudden downpours and an eerie, exhilarating landscape of Mayan ruins and enormous palms. “Rach had the keys to the peninsula’s archaeological sites and after the visitors had left, we’d sit on the Mayan pyramids with spider monkeys for company and smoke long into the night,” she recounts.

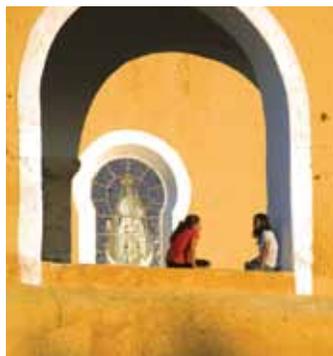
Wendy made the difficult decision to end the relationship when her placement expired, but Matthew Lister and his foreign sweetheart ended up tying the knot. “I went to Japan when I was 26, slightly older than most people who do TEFL. I met the right person and was at an age when I was ready to settle down,” explains Matthew.

Even when relationships don’t develop, flirting is not uncommon in the TEFL classroom — unsurprising when singletons of similar age are thrown together. When she was working in Brussels, Marianne recalls the frisson of sitting next to a student she fancied and asking him what he did last night. “I can’t think of other work situations where you have the licence to ask such personal,

CASE STUDY: MEXICO



During her year in remote, rural Yucatan, Wendy Robbins, 47, wore a live-beetle brooch, kept a spider monkey and parrot as pets, and slept in a hammock every night. “I was studying Spanish at university and this was the first real thing I’d done completely on my own. The confidence it gave me has served me ever since,” says the radio and television presenter. “I found my students’ passion for progressing completely humbling.”



Above: Convento de San Antonio de Padua in Izamal, Yucatan

but entirely legitimate, questions,” Wendy explains.

Meredith Bartlett can’t think of a period in her life when complete strangers were quite so personal. Going out with a local boy might be part of the TEFL package, but a downside in an insular, parochial place such as Sicily or, in Meredith’s case, Athens in the nineties, is the rampant sexism. “I went to Greece with a friend and every time we went out we had an unbelievable amount of hassle,” she admits.

But let’s not forget perspective. However irritating it is to be pestered in the high street, the most overwhelming feeling you get as a Brit teaching abroad is the utter privilege of parachuting into other people’s lives. In a developing country, that feeling’s arguably even more acute. Writer and

painter Mark McCrum spent his gap year teaching at a multiracial school in the Botswana bush in 1977, a year after the Soweto riots. “My job title was teacher-aid, which meant I was a sort of intermediary between the children and the staff,” he recalls. “Many of those children were the offspring of South African activists and were in Botswana because there was no education for blacks in their country.”

The school followed a British curriculum and Mark, who went on to read English at university, taught literature. “The kids’ familiarity with African witchcraft meant that Macbeth really spoke to them,” he says. “One boy was obsessed with the ultimate power play, *Julius Caesar*. It was so exciting to see English literature speaking to the children of an emerging nation and a powerful lesson in how people are the same the world over.”

Fifteen years later, Mark returned to the school as part of his research for *Happy Sad Land*, a travel book about his journey through Botswana and South Africa in what turned out to be the last year of apartheid. The title launched a successful writing career that so far includes 11 books.

Getting that one-way ticket to Sicily doesn’t seem so clueless now.

essentials THE DETAILS

COURSES

» Qualification requirements for TEFL vary from country to country and school to school. Where there’s high demand for teachers, employers sometimes accept unqualified candidates. With around two billion people set to study English over the next decade, this phenomenon could grow. However, the minimum requirement for the majority of language schools is currently a certificate based on at least 100 hours’ training. www.tefl.com

» Cambridge University’s CELTA

is internationally acclaimed. The course takes 120 hours and can be done full- or part-time. It costs from £1,100. www.cambridgeesol.org

» Trinity College’s highly regarded TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) course costs between £800 and £1,200 at centres across the UK. www.trinitycollege.co.uk

» Berlitz has been teaching foreign languages for 130 years and has 550 centres across the globe. Although it trains its

own teachers, candidates must come with a CELTA or TESOL qualification. www.berlitz.co.uk

VOLUNTEER TEACHING

» Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) is a leading development charity that sends volunteers to work, including teaching, with full financial support. www.vso.org.uk

» Volunteer Abroad organises overseas voluntary work for career breaks, summer placements and gap years. Its teaching projects focus

on conversational English and participants don’t always require a TEFL qualification. www.projects-abroad.co.uk

MEDIA INFORMATION

The *TES* newspaper has a guide to teaching abroad with sections on getting there, acclimatisation and the eventual return home. www.tes.co.uk

BOOKS TO READ

Teaching English Abroad by Susan Griffith. RRP: £14.99.
Teaching English as a Foreign Language for Dummies by Michelle Maxom. RRP: £16.99. □