

Being Canadian

By Julie Fortier

We're all familiar with the stereotypical views of what it means to be Canadian. According to Hollywood—and countless beer commercials—Canadians are polite, friendly lumberjack types who attend cottage parties and play hockey 12 months a year. We walk our invariably clean and safe streets, apologizing to people and inanimate objects alike if we happen to bump into anything in our travels. And the cold. Everyone always mentions the cold.

For many Canadians, being Canadian conjures up a deep love of nature, cultural diversity and people who are kind, reserved, peaceful and—if all those backpackers with maple leaves sewn onto their bags are anything to judge by—enjoy an international reputation that is second to none. And yes, we all agree it's pretty cold up here.

But just how accurate are all these stereotypes? With their travels throughout the world and their roles as representatives of their home country, many DFAIT employees offer a unique perspective on how the rest of the world sees us and how we see our place in the world.



Living in Sweden has refined Marc-André Dubois' sense of being Canadian.

As a first-generation Indo-Canadian who grew up in Ottawa, Priya Sinha's concept of what it means to be Canadian changed when she was posted to the New Delhi mission from 2008 to 2010.

"I had visited Delhi in the past, so I thought I knew what it was going to be like," says Sinha, a spokesperson in the Media Relations Office. "I speak the language, I have family there. But by working there, I realized just how Canadian I am."

Sinha's sense of personal space and need for quiet and calm—she apologizes to her car when she slams the door too hard!—were things that made her stand out in India, where jostling for space is almost a national sport. The rough and tumble streets of New Delhi took a bit of getting used to.

That sentiment is shared by Marc-André Dubois, receptionist and consular assistant at the Canadian embassy in Sweden. "I moved to Sweden in 2007, and since then my understanding of being Canadian has sharpened a lot," says Dubois. "Abroad, your identity is refined by the contact you have with other cultures."

For him, being Canadian means standing out as the loud and friendly one—quite the contrast from the quiet and reserved reputation Canadians believe they hold. Dubois, who is also studying political science at Stockholm University, says his Swedish friends joke that he is the "loud North American" in contrast to the more reserved Swedes.

As an academic liaison for the Canadian embassy in Norway, Monique L'heureux, Coordinator, Spousal Employment Support Office, says her students were taken aback by Canadians' outgoing nature.

Norwegian students studying in Canada were especially surprised by how welcoming Atlantic Canadians were—meeting them at the airport, showing them around town, inviting them into their homes.

"Sweden and Norway are very private societies. It's not typical to be invited into a stranger's home," she says. "Spending years in Canada changed these university students. They became noticeably more open and welcoming to others."

Carmen Larsen-Grijalva knows first-hand how welcoming Canadians can be. She worked as a locally engaged staff member at the Canadian embassy in Venezuela for almost eight years before emigrating to Canada in 2007.

"A Canadian couple who previously worked at the embassy welcomed me into their home in Ottawa during those first four months, and they never charged me a cent," she recalls. She says her new Canadian family reviewed her resumé and cover letters, taught her how to file taxes and how to recycle, and even helped her look for her first home. "I truly got to experience what Canada does for its citizens, and I knew that this was the country where my son and I could have our home and a brighter future."

Part of that openness also translates to Canadians' embracing of cultural diversity, maybe because so many of us are from somewhere else. Like