

Valérie Luebken

16. Oktober 2022



My name is Valérie Luebken.

This is what I do: I am a career diplomat, just recently posted as the new Consul General of France in Hamburg and Director of the Institut Français. I have occupied a variety of positions throughout my professional life including press attaché in Los Angeles and Washington D.C., a temporary position at the European Union in Brussels and Head of Cabinet at the Embassy in Berlin.

This is what I could teach you, that you cannot learn from a book: Diplomacy is multi-faceted and complex. It occurs in a series of interactions that sometimes are neither explicit nor intentional. It is the interaction of perceptions of the world and this occurs on all levels imaginable from the political, the cultural to one-on-one

relationships. Distilled into its simplest form, diplomacy is the meeting of people and arises from the connection they create in a small (sometimes carefully crafted) encounter.

This is what culture means to me: Throughout my career, I have been fortunate enough to be posted across the United States and Europe. Being far from home has sometimes meant reflecting on my culture and the country that I represent. France is difficult to summarize – from its people to its landscapes, it can be described as elegant and soft but also harsh and in-your-face. France, like any country, comprises a unique multitude of attributes. Some, like the quality of our food, are more appreciated than others. One of the many things that makes me proud of my culture is the richness of our literature and our art. As someone who is an avid reader, being away from home sometimes means delving into a French novel at the end of a long day.

This is how my work reflects my culture/s: Everything I do professionally reflects my culture! As a diplomat, and now Consul, my culture and the government I represent is in every aspect of my day-to-day activities. I strive first and foremost to translate France's values of cooperation, freedom and equality. I aim to bring a proactive and empathetic spirit to all of my professional endeavors.

This is my utopia: A utopia is hard to imagine in a field so fiercely ruled by the reality of our world. However, for me, an ideal scenario would be to see women empowered to occupy all the positions that they rightly deserve despite the hurdles thrown their way by today's societies. I wish for a world not so starkly ruled by competition and violence (in all its forms). Fundamentally, it is a broader sense of equality that I seek to see between individuals, groups and states.

Quick bits

My favorite book genre: novels

My favorite book: Le Lion de Joseph Kessel

My favorite place to read: in bed

Where I buy my books: in inspiring bookshops and on flea markets

My favorite museum: Le Petit Palais in Paris

My favorite artist (painter/sculptor/performance): Karl-Schmidt Rottluff and Mark Rothko

My favorite source/s for news/information/further education: Arte TV

My favorite dish to eat: oysters

My favorite outside activity: beach (swimming, walking, reading)

My favorite place in Hamburg: the banks of the Alster near Rabenstrasse

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French women in politics and women diplomats

[17. November 2022](#)

Written by Valérie Luebken; Translation by H. Runte

Dear readers, I am slowly getting used to my new role as French Consul General to Northern Germany and am delighted to have started discovering the cultural richness and diversity of the magnificent city of Hamburg. This being my first article for cultureum, I would like to tell you a little about French women in politics and women diplomats.

When asked to speak about France, one of the topics I like to discuss concerns the representation and the career paths of women, because a lot of progress is being made in this area!

Please judge for yourself:

1. Gender equality or parity in politics has been improving for some time for women, with the exception, however, of positions of high responsibility.

At the national level and according to figures from July 2022, there are for example:

- 35% women in the Senate
- 37% in the National Assembly
- 20% in town halls, 45% in municipal councils
- 20% as county heads, 51% in the county council

We can therefore see that the higher you go in the hierarchy of power, the less women are represented. An example: only 20% of mayors and less than a third of regional leaders are women. In the National Assembly, only 37.3% of women are represented, i.e. 215 out of a total of 577 deputies. We are still far from having achieved perfect equality, even if, for the first time in the history of France, a woman has been elected president of the National Assembly, Ms. Yael Braun Pivet.

In the Senate, the proportion of women is increasing, but this trend is slow and parity will theoretically only be achieved in 2026. Women now occupy 35.1% of seats compared to 25% in 2014, partly due to a commitment to parity, which requires

candidate nominations from both sexes.

A brief reminder of the laws that have facilitated these changes Laws for parity in politics:

- In 1999, a constitutional reform that sets quotas for women was adopted: parties that do not include at least 50% of candidates from both sexes have to pay a fine. Two laws in 2000 and 2007 support this regulation.
- The law for effective equality between women and men
- The introduction of paternity leave (in 2021) is also part of recent reforms, thus furthering greater equality between men and women
- The French experience therefore shows that real equality between women and men can only be the result of a collective political will – not a happy coincidence of history. France sees quotas as a useful tool to achieve gender equality. Equality laws have helped improve the position of women in politics, but women still remain largely excluded from leadership positions.

2. France has been conducting feminist diplomacy for 10 years on the European and international scene, a priority set by President Macron.

This takes place in a worrying international context.

Women and girls are the first to be affected by poverty, conflicts (the example of the Ukraine) and climate change. Their place in society confronts them with difficulties and discrimination everywhere and in all areas, a reality exacerbated by the Covid pandemic and its consequences.

In some countries, sexual violence is also used as a weapon of war to terrorize the population.

Finally, the consequences of the pandemic are particularly serious with regard to the decline in economic activity and the loss of jobs for women. The sectors most affected by the crisis are tourism, gastronomy, and service providers.

This is why our Ministry of Foreign Affairs has placed equality at the center of France's external policies and actions.

Since 2016, France's policy has been based on a strategic document entitled „France's strategy for external actions for the benefit of the population that improve citizens' rights and sexual and reproductive health for the period of 2021-2024.“

For us diplomats, this strategy includes:

- a) A vade-mecum on equality between women and men – The practical implementation of parity at headquarters and in messages;

- b) The appointment of correspondents for gender equality in each department of the ministry, permanent representation or embassy;
- c) The promotion of equality between women and men in the framework of bilateral dialogues and international negotiations;

Things are changing, very positively, but of course, a lot remains to be done! The pay gap between men and women, for example, remains very high in France: in 2020, women received an hourly wage 15.8% lower than that of men.

And this is what I wanted to share with you today. Sincerely, Valerie Luebken

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The French Way

21. Februar 2023



1.

Question Dr. J: *As a diplomat, you have lived in several different countries. What aspects of your daily routine remained French, regardless of the country you were living in, and what habits or rituals did you pick up from your stays abroad?*

Answer Valérie Lübken: I would like to start by emphasizing just how much this topic has preoccupied me throughout my career: as

a diplomat, how do you find the right dose of, on the one hand, representing your country abroad, and on the other hand, integrating into the life of the country you are working in? It's a question of balance between finding comfort – physical, human and intellectual – that comes from „being part of the local culture“, and maintaining a necessary distance from the representation and the defense of the image of the country for which we work every day?

I would say that my answer to this question has been chiseled by my experiences, and the parallel evolution of my professional and family life. Things happened naturally with the birth of my daughters in the United States to whom I instinctively wanted to pass on my French culture during our stays in Los Angeles and Washington DC.

Three major aspects of my life have always remained “French,” regardless of the country where I have lived:

1. The rhythm of the days, the “temporality”

Even after many years in the United States and Germany, I continue to get up later, I take a longer time to eat, and I take a break for sports around noon. I work best in the late afternoon, and I love going out late and living in the night. For example, I was rather frustrated during an exchange with the German Embassy in Vienna where I had taken over the position of press adviser for a few weeks. The press meetings started at 8 a.m.

on Fridays, and we always finished by 2 p.m. at the latest. Afterwards, I wandered the streets of Vienna aimlessly, and felt a vague sense of guilt...

2. The second aspect is a lot more typical and expected, but I have to mention it: the food

I paid a fortune in Arizona to eat a little cheese, or traveled miles to LA to find foie gras (which is banned in California, by the way).

I have to mention the French ritual of long dinners with friends that extend into the evening without a set time where guests have to leave. During these meals, we recreate the world, as they say, and we discuss politics, a behavior considered impolite in the United States, for example.

3. Finally, French literature. It is an anchor for me when I miss France. It is my buoy, my compass.

Let's say that I read foreign literature when I'm in France and a lot of French books when I'm away from France!

The habits that I have adopted now come to me unconsciously, but here they are:

- I love the American warmth in human contacts and especially when meeting new people. This is so important, and we still don't always manage this in France.
- And then... I adore German bread and the habit of having a solid breakfast in the morning!

2.

Question Dr. J : *When I cross the border into France, I walk differently, talk differently, I react differently to jokes, comments, criticism, etc. How are you different when you are in France? And do you feel different when you do get to be in the Hexagone?*

Answer Valérie Lübken: Yes, I am different in France, especially when I approach people. Things are less formal. I am less careful. I often use humor to solve problems, and it works most of the time. Even with serious topics, I use a touch of irony that I know how to mold and navigate when the cultural environment is more familiar to me.

But I must also admit that, as soon as I arrive in France, I instinctively adapt a more „grouchy,“ critical tone, an attitude that “everything is going badly,” when in fact, this is only a façade: life is beautiful, but you are not allowed to say this!

3.

Question Dr. J: *If asked to name a few people who, for you, represent France, which persons would you mention? What politicians, artists, writers, scientists, etc. are typically French, or could best represent France today?*

Answer Valérie Lübken: There would be dozens of them, but let me start with the President of the Republic, Emmanuel Macron, as well as the European deputy, Nathalie Loiseau, for their beautiful European convictions, Annie Ernaux and her sarcastic declarations, but also Simone Weil, Pierre Soulages, who continue in their own way and beyond their disappearance, to represent France and its history, Thomas Pesquet, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Alain Ducasse and many others.

I am very proud of all the foreign artists or artists of foreign origin who have succeeded in France and made it their homeland. They are perhaps the most typically French.

4.

Question Dr. J : *The French are known for their “savoir vivre” and that “je ne sais quoi” that makes them special. What advice would you give to all those who, like me, stand in awe of the “French way” and strive to be just a little more like the French?*

Answer Valérie Lübken: The French Way for me is the attention to detail, small nuances that, without necessarily being flashy or expensive, attract attention, make you cheerful and beautiful, or enhance an interior or an outfit.

This lies in the charm of finding those hidden little gems, accessories from a flea market (a scarf, a belt), or in incorporating contrasts, for example, between the top and the bottom of an outfit – a chic dress with more sporty boots – or wearing bright lipstick with barely any eye makeup.

Very small things that mark and express a personality.

Written by Valérie Luebken; Translation by H. Runte

Michel Foucault in Hamburg

19. Juli 2023



Question Dr. J: Could you tell us about the beginnings of the *Institut français*, which has existed in Hamburg since 1951?

Answer Valérie Lübken: The French Institute in Hamburg was created in the context of the post-war period as a cultural institution committed to reconciliation efforts between France and Germany, the maintenance of peace, as well as communication and mutual understanding among the people of Europe. The institute opened its doors to the public in September 1951.

Between 1959 and 1960, Michel Foucault directed the institute, lived within the walls of Heimhuder Strasse 55, and taught at the University of Hamburg. In the space of a year, he organized a number of events on behalf of the IF – several cultural events, including having the famous Roland Barthes and Alain Robbe-Grillet as guests.



Question Dr. J: One of the first questions I asked you when we first spoke was about Michel Foucault, who was, as you are now as well, the Head of the *Institut français* in Hamburg between 1959 and 1960. How does it feel to be constantly asked about this very famous “previous colleague,” and do you feel like you are in any way “following in his footsteps?”



Answer Valérie Lübken: No, not at all, because Michel Foucault only spent a year in Hamburg and because my tasks at the institute are completely different from his.

Apart from the fact that I work and receive guests on the 2nd floor of the Institute, where Michel Foucault had his private apartment, my daily tasks range from the political, economic, cultural and scientific representation of France, to contacts with Franco-German associations, to assisting French people who are detained in Hamburg or who are experiencing social difficulties.

Another difference is that my consular district extends to the Danish border. I am a career diplomat, unlike Michel

Foucault, who was a brilliant philosopher and intellectual who himself nourished, through his spirit and his person, the cultural life of Hamburg.

Question Dr. J: Every time I go to the French consulate in Hamburg, which serves also as Headquarters for the *Institut français*, I am greeted by a plaque commemorating Foucault’s stay in Hamburg. As someone with a PhD in French Literature, I have almost been conditioned to admire Foucault, so I am overcome by a sense of awe and excitement every time I am at the *Institut français de Hambourg*. Do you in any way feel Foucault’s spirit lurking around at the institute? And if so, in what way?

Answer Valérie Lübken: No, absolutely not. As explained above, our objectives and working conditions at the *Institut français* are extremely different.

Cultural budgets are reduced a little more each year, and it is no longer possible to bring in prestigious guests. We are also responsible for how France is portrayed on social media networks, something that did not exist at the time of intellectual proliferation that Michel Foucault himself experienced and generated.

Question Dr. J: What was Foucault's main contribution to Hamburg – be it through his teaching at the University of Hamburg or through his work at the *Institut français*. How did Hamburg affect Foucault and his work?

Answer Valérie Lübken: When he arrived in Hamburg in 1959, Michel Foucault was 33 years old and absolutely unknown in Germany. This year spent at the *Institut français* was, it is true, a very fruitful phase in Foucault's life, after having spent 3 years in Sweden (in Uppsala) and in Poland (in Warsaw). Since Foucault spoke German fluently and knew the literature and culture of his country of residence, it was very easy for him to adjust to daily life. I can confirm, as a diplomat, how much this prerequisite of knowing the language and the culture facilitates one's arrival and cultural integration into a new country!

When he came to Hamburg, Michel Foucault set himself a precise personal agenda: to finish „The History of Madness“ and to write „his complementary thesis.“ This year in Hamburg allowed him, among other things, to return to Paris as an established academic professor and to truly launch his future career.

I would like to share with you the figures that still remain in the diplomatic archives about the time Foucault spent at the *Institut français de Hambourg*:

- 1,450 people took French courses at the Institute that year.
- at the institute, Foucault gave 3 lectures on French civilization and 4 special courses on difficult literary texts, French grammar, translation, and conversation.
- 500 people were registered at the library at the time.

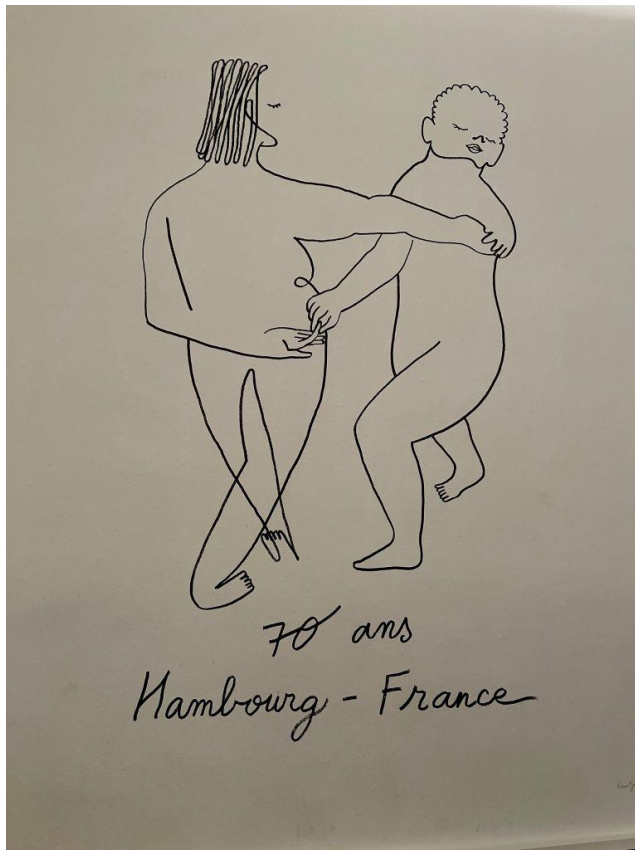
Foucault taught „Political thought of the 18th century“ at the University of Hamburg (the last semester of 1959 and the first semester of 1960) as well as contemporary French theater (Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus etc.). His students were passionate, but poorly prepared and sometimes „totally overwhelmed“ by Foucault, who had a differentiated and modern view of the literature of his country. Foucault liked to use transdisciplinary perspectives such as philosophy, sociology, semiotics or even painting. He was a committed, profound, and enthusiastic scholar. Foucault was very popular with his



students and had excellent, close contacts with them, which was not the case with his colleagues from the *Romanistisches Seminar*, who were somewhat disconcerted by his methods.

Question Dr. J: Foucault brought many great French thinkers, writers, and artists to Hamburg. For example, he invited the French philosopher, Roland Barthes to hold lectures at the institute. He welcomed writers such as Alain Robbe-Grillet. He had Jean Cocteau's play, "L'école des veuves," put on at the institute. In what way did Foucault bring Germany and France closer together? What aspects of France did he allow Germans to discover?

Answer Valérie Lübken: At the French Institute, he actually staged „The School for Widows“ by Jean Cocteau, „The Colony“ by Pierre Carlet de Marivaux as well as „Night and Day“ by Claude André Puget.



But these plays represented only a tiny part of the activities of the Institute, where, at the time, concerts, conferences, films, and receptions punctuated daily life. The official guests from France were numerous: writers, scientists and journalists. Michel Foucault's thesis supervisor, Jean Hippolyte, Roland Barthes, and even the 1955 Goncourt Prize winner, Roger Ikor, visited Hamburg.

But of course, the institute's most famous guest that year was undoubtedly Alain Robbe-Grillet, who in November 1959 gave a lecture entitled "Towards a new realism." This was the first time that Foucault and Robbe-Grillet met. Foucault found Robbe-Grillet "very likeable" and invited him

out for an evening at the Christmas Market.

But it is above all to Sankt Pauli that the director of the IF liked to take his visitors, who were then in turn inspired by this special Hamburg neighborhood. It was thanks to such visits, for example, that the writer Pierre Gascar published his book "The night of Sankt Pauli."

Michel Foucault was quite open about his homosexuality. But keep in mind that homosexuality was banned by law in Germany at the time. In 1959 alone, there were 3,800 convictions for "homosexual offences" in Germany.

The German-Dutch writer, Rolf Italiaander, then permanent secretary of the Academy of Fine Arts, recounts having met during a soirée at the Institute „a charming young girl“ alongside Michel Foucault. This charming girl, Italiaander would discover by the end of the party, was actually a man.

Rolf Italiaander also speaks about how the students and young minds of Hamburg tried in vain to secure a professorship at the university for Foucault. Their failure to do so was, according to them, due to the provincialism and small-minded thinking that marked federal Germany at the time.

Written by Valérie Luebken; Translation by H. Runte

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A diplomat's guide to Paris

[27. September 2023](#)



Question Dr. J: Many of the readers of this blog are big fans of Paris. So, I thought I'd ask you about a diplomat's view of this city, that is admired and coveted by the entire world? How is Paris the center of diplomacy? What is the essence of Paris for you? What do you think is the best way to really „feel“ Paris?

Answer Valérie Luebken: For us diplomats, Paris is in fact the center of diplomacy, since it is here that the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs is located, spread over two emblematic sites: the Quai d'Orsay, the minister's residence built between 1844 and 1856 (see photo), and since 2008, the former premises of the *Imprimerie Nationale* in the 15th *arrondissement*. The capital is also the venue for major international conferences, such as the Paris Climate Conference in 2015, which welcomed over 40,000 delegates and observers to Le Bourget.

For me, one of the most exciting and historically authentic districts in Paris is the



Marais, which includes most of the city's historic architectural heritage. But it's also a neighborhood that's home to many minorities: Jewish (whose history is recounted at the *Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme*), Chinese (with the community originally from Wenzhou) and LGBTQI since the 1980s.



<https://www.svadore.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Guide-to-Exploring-Le-Marais-District-Paris-svadore-1-12.jpg>

Question Dr. J: Which Parisian monuments are incomparable and essential to the city? Which monuments are directly linked to diplomacy or the history of diplomacy?

Answer Valérie Luebken: I'd say that all the monuments contribute, in their own way, to the beauty and charm of Paris. It's a harmonious architectural ensemble, yet one that blends the very old with the contemporary, like the *Cour du Louvre*.

In doing so, Paris embodies French diplomacy, evoking its history in many places. I'm thinking, for example, of the Pont Alexandre-III, between the *Pont de la Concorde* and the *Pont des Invalides*, linking the *Esplanade des Invalides* and the *Avenue Winston-Churchill*, where the *Petit Palais* and *Grand Palais* are located. Inaugurated for the 1900 Paris



Universal Exhibition, the bridge was intended to symbolize the Franco-Russian friendship established by the 1891 alliance between Emperor Alexander III (1845-1894) and French President Sadi Carnot. The foundation stone was laid by Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, Empress Alexandra Fedorovna and President Felix Faure on October 7, 1896.

Question Dr. J: Could you tell us about your 3 favorite museums in Paris and why you like them the best?

Answer Valérie Luebken: I love all of them, but my 3 favorite museums are the *Musée du Quai Branly*, the *Petit Palais* and the *Musée Cluny*.

I love going to the *Musée du Quai Branly*, also called the *Musée des Arts et Civilizations d'Afrique, d'Asie, d'Océanie et des Amériques* before 2016, and located in the 7th arrondissement of Paris, on the *Quai Jacques-Chirac*. There, and past the long winding ramp traversed by Charles Sandison's video art installation, I endlessly explore new galaxies. Fabulous!



https://www.culturalheritageonline.com/location-3919_Museo-Quai-Branly—Virtual-Tour-360%C2%B0.php

The *Petit Palais* is a lush green, beautiful and peaceful setting in the heart of Paris. It's a place to take a breather, eat, drink and meditate. This beautiful *Musée de la Ville de Paris* invites you to unique exhibitions on *Le Paris de la modernité* (1905-1925) or the black-and-white treasures of Dürer, Rembrandt, Goya and Toulouse-Lautrec. A real treat!

The *Musée Cluny*, dedicated to monuments, furnishings and objects d'art from Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, has reopened on May 12th, 2022 after undergoing a 20 months thorough renovation and now designed to provide it with all the modern equipment it needs, and to improve the reception and accessibility of the public, as well as the museographic tour. For the layman in me, it's a place that is to be discovered in small steps, so dense are the information and exhibitions.

Question Dr. J: In the hustle and bustle of a bustling cosmopolitan city like Paris, how does a diplomat get around? How do most people get around the city?

Answer Valérie Luebken: By public transport, like most Parisians... who are nonetheless increasingly taking bicycles to get to work or to do their shopping.

Question Dr. J: Paris is also known for its many beautiful parks. Which do you like the best and why? Do you ever go to work outdoors, whether for a walk, a business lunch, etc.?

Answer Valérie Luebken: The *Parc du Luxembourg* is undoubtedly the most emblematic, with its sailboat basin that all children love, but I also love the *Parc de Bagatelle*. This botanical garden, located on the *Bois de Boulogne* side, is absolutely romantic and magical and covers 25 hectares.

When I'm in Paris, I always return to the *Parc André Citroën*, close to my ministry in the 15th arrondissement and famous for its series of gardens. My children spent hours there when we lived nearby. There are seven gardens in total: black, blue, green, orange, red, silver and gold. Each corresponds to a metal, a color, a planet, a meaning, or a day of the week.



Question Dr. J: Could you describe a perfect day in Paris – a day without work, with lots of delights and beautiful moments?

Answer Valérie Luebken: It would be a day of the week when I could go and see an exhibition without queuing or finding myself with thousands of visitors. Perhaps I could take a leisurely stroll to one of the many Parisian markets and have a coffee on the terrace afterwards! End with a stroll, a bit of shopping or a film if it's raining too hard. A slower, more reserved interlude in this hurried city.



Question Dr. J: Some people visiting Paris for the first time might be a little worried or downright frightened by such a big city. What advice would you give them? Are there any behaviors to avoid in Paris? Are there things to pay particular attention to? What would be your „rules“ for a carefree stay in Paris?

Answer Valérie Luebken: First of all, always keep an eye on your belongings, as in any big city.

But Paris isn't as vast as Berlin, New York or London, and I'd recommend that those who really want to discover it should do so by district, and on foot, taking the time to stop in the little bistros and stores, look up and enter

the backyards, which are always full of surprises.

And once you've made contact, Parisians love to talk, complain and tell stories, so ... enjoy!

Question Dr. J: In conclusion, how does Paris compare with the rest of France? How about Hamburg?

Answer Valérie Luebken: Paris is not France, even though many Parisians have moved to the countryside, the Atlantic coast or Marseille since the pandemic.

France is changing, and the Olympic Games will offer many different settings throughout France and even overseas (Tahiti, Nice, Bordeaux, Nantes, Saint Etienne etc.).

Hamburg is one of a kind, a beautiful Hanseatic city, trading with the whole world and offering a quality of life that would be hard to find in Paris.

Written by Valérie Luebken; Translation by H. Runte

