

My Experience in the Foreign Office



What is a Diplomat? This was the question that my family and friends asked me when I told them that I was going to be joining the Foreign Office.

It's surprisingly difficult to answer.

The Oxford English Dictionary describes diplomacy as “...*the profession, activity, or skill of managing international relations*” and a Diplomat as someone who “...*typically represents a country abroad*”. The famous American travel writer, Caskie Stinnett, once said: ‘*A diplomat is a person who can tell you to go to hell in such a way that you actually look forward to the trip.*’

For me, a Diplomat is someone who enjoys building relationships and understanding cultures; someone who is adept at gathering information and influencing decision-makers; and someone who takes pride in promoting national interests and keeping people safe.

I joined the Foreign Office because I wanted to make a difference in countries around the world and to promote our interests and values. I have been very fortunate during my career to have had some incredible experiences and I would like to tell you about them in the hope that you might also consider applying to the Diplomatic Service.

After completing a Masters in Chemistry at UCL, I spent three years working as a teacher in rural Japan. My first experience of culture shock was trying to explain why I was vegetarian to a group of sceptical Japanese students. I really enjoyed the opportunity to be an ‘ambassador’ for the UK and this, together with a long-standing interest in international affairs, prompted me to apply to the Foreign Office.

I joined the Foreign Office Fast Stream in 2002 and spent a year on the NATO desk in London. I then volunteered to serve in the Coalition Provisional Authority as the Political Officer for southern Iraq based in Basrah. Being in Iraq just after the war was an amazing yet humbling experience.



Flying on a Chinook into Basrah

After Iraq, I was posted to Uganda for three years. This posting had huge significance for my family as my mother had been expelled from the country by Idi Amin's forces in 1972.

I was responsible for reporting on the conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army, the ensuing humanitarian crisis, and the subsequent peace talks in Juba. At times, particularly in 2004, the situation was awful with almost 2 million people living in Internally Displaced Persons camps. But the experience of working with these communities was also hugely rewarding and by 2007, many people were able to return to some form of normality.



Interviewing a former LRA victim in an IDP Camp

There were some particularly surreal moments during my time in Uganda not least having dinner with Gillian Anderson during the filming of *The Last King of Scotland*. It was strange to meet her in person after spending several years staring at her poster on my bedroom wall...

After Uganda, I returned to London and spent four years working on counter-terrorism issues. I was involved in a number of high-profile kidnap cases involving British nationals and got to see first-hand the efforts that our government makes to keep our nationals safe.

For the last two years, I have been posted to the British High Commission in Malaysia with responsibility for foreign policy, security and press issues. This was my dream posting because of the breadth of opportunities: One day, I could be lobbying for Malaysian support on a resolution in the UN and the next, I could be preparing an event to promote UK education.

The highlight of my posting so far has been the Royal Visit of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to celebrate The Queen's Diamond Jubilee. I was tasked with overseeing the preparations for their three-day visit and then accompanying them throughout. Our programme took them 2,000 miles across Malaysia from a Mosque in central Kuala Lumpur to the rainforest canopy in Borneo. The impact that the couple had on our relationship with Malaysia and the Malaysian people was incredible. In conjunction with the visit, the Malaysian Government announced an expansion of the network of protected forests in Borneo to an area larger than that of greater London. And the Duke and Duchess's visit to Hospis Malaysia helped to kick-start Malaysia's national paediatric palliative care programme, which will revolutionise the support given to young people suffering from life-limiting illnesses.



Meeting the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge during their visit to Malaysia in September 2012

I want to end by saying that the Foreign Office would really welcome more diverse applications. It is hugely important for the Foreign Office to be a true reflection of modern

Britain. People around the world admire us for our diversity, and our deep understanding of cultures and languages gives us an unparalleled advantage. I also think it helps to build cohesion within communities in the UK if people can see that there are diverse individuals who are proud to be British and proud to represent Britain on the global stage.

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