

British Ladies Club

Interview

With around 400 members, the British Ladies Club (BLC), founded in 1969, is still a reliable contact for newcomers to Luxembourg. Initially founded by a group of British women, today the English language is the unifying element of expatriates coming from all over the world and living in Luxembourg.

A successful expat woman from Albania becomes chair of the British Ladies Club (BLC) in Luxemburg. Does your own biography reflect the philosophy of the BLC?

J.I.: First of all, the British Ladies Club is open to any English-speaking woman who wants to join, regardless of their origins and where they come from. The club currently represents 32 nationalities and counts around 400 members, more than half of which are non-British. Personally, I have a very international background, having lived, studied and worked in various countries. The club's international character thus appealed to me. Secondly, the BLC is a women's club, and having been an advocate for and strong supporter of women's causes for many years, I could easily identify with it. Moreover, the BLC is about community building and I've always believed that a group of thoughtful and committed citizens can make a difference. And last but not least, I love diversity and I have always believed that strength lies in differences, not in similarities, which is why the multinational qualities of the BLC resonate so strongly with me.

How did you find your way to the BLC?

J.I.: My husband relocated to Luxembourg with the corporation he had been working for for the past 8 years, and my son and I followed him. After having enjoyed a very dynamic career in Albania, I suddenly found myself in Luxembourg with nothing to do, which, as you may

imagine, was not easy for me. Although I was aware of the personal challenges a relocation would bring, being a third-country national without a work permit, moving to Luxembourg was a joint decision my husband and I took in the interest of our son, who we believed would thus have many more opportunities as he grew up. Yet, the professional career I had previously had, both international and local, pushed me to aspire to also achieve things here in Luxembourg. I knew that I would not have things handed to me but I was prepared to put myself out there.

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It happened gradually. The first door I knocked on was that of Dress for Success. Its international outlook encouraged me to send an e-mail to see if they needed volunteers. That is how I started my first volunteer experience here in Luxembourg. The Network was another association I volunteered with for a while. But having had a career that allowed me to reach my full potential, I felt that I could do more. Since most of my professional career had been US-related, working with the US Embassy in Albania as well as USAID

(U.S. Agency for International Development), I felt that the U.S. Embassy in Luxembourg might be another port of call. The staff there were very welcoming and made me feel right at home. With the refugee crisis unfolding that year, the embassy had made a special grant available to manage funds for refugee women which I volunteered to support at the Red Cross since I had previously been involved in development programmes. I remained heavily involved with this project until its completion two years later.

At the same time I joined a few clubs including the British Ladies Club. I was participating in some of their activities but never aspired to be chair until I saw the role advertised month after month. I knew I had the potential, the capability and the background to fill the position but I was not sure if there were any regulations that barred non-British citizens from assuming the role of chairwoman. Eventually, I put myself forward and volunteered for the position hoping it was not against club guidelines to do so. I am sure this must have sounded ‘bonkers’ at the time. People knew me but I had not been a member for that long. Nevertheless, I was eventually elected in the general assembly of the BLC in September 2017.

The BLC is about to mark its 50th anniversary, you have been chairwoman for now over a year after arriving in Luxembourg only in 2015. One would expect the expat community to be a very mobile one with

members coming and leaving. How do you ensure continuity in your club?

J.I.: It is true that there are people who only stay for a limited period of time because they arrive here on fixed term contracts or they do not integrate very well and then leave Luxembourg to go back to their home countries. As in every club, you have people leaving and membership dropping briefly but recovery is often swift as there are always members renewing their membership and new people registering. We are a port of entry to newcomers in Luxembourg. We make sure to offer a wide range of activities so that everyone can find their place in our club, whether they be mothers, professionals, entrepreneurs or more mature members. Our staple activities such as lunches, newcomers' events, quiz and movie nights etc. get the permanent members together on a regular basis while allowing newcomers to join in. These activities can be attended by anyone up to three times before they decide whether or not they want to become a full-time member but most people seek membership after their first visit. We have an annual carboot sale, which has been running for 25 years and the generated funds go to the Ville de Luxembourg in support of their social causes. The carboot sale attracts people all the way from France and Belgium. For some activities like our annual Christmas lunch or our Golden Gala, which will be held this year on 4th May to mark the 50th anniversary of the BLC, members are given priority, although we leave a few places open for non-members to attend.

Why do newcomers reach out to the BLC and what do they expect to find?

J.I.: The BLC is a lot about people from different countries coming together and sharing the experience of being an expat in Luxembourg with the common wish and need to integrate, to establish reliable friendships and learn more about the country they now live in. Although you do not necessarily need a club to get information nowadays, there is a difference between meeting someone virtually and getting first-hand information from someone who has lived here for a long time and who you have a real connection

with. Many online platforms flood you with information which can feel quite overwhelming.

How is the BLC set up?

J.I.: The BLC is not just an ordinary charity, at times I feel it is more akin to a well-organised institution. We have divided Luxembourg into different areas, each one covered by one or two representatives who have lived in Luxembourg for a long time and know a lot about the country. When a newcomer joins, they are introduced to their local point of contact who they can ask for help and advise. And then there are times when you really need insider knowledge on specific subjects, for instance when you need a babysitter, you want to place your child in the right hands.

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New members are thus warmly welcomed into the 'family' and many strong friendships have grown out of this.

Does your club maintain a network with other resident associations?

J.I.: We connect with other associations when we fundraise for charity. Every year, we select two charities to support, one in Luxembourg and another one in the UK. This year our chosen charity for Luxembourg is ALAN, the Association for Rare Diseases in Luxembourg.

We also held a joint picnic with the American Ladies Club which was organized as a family day, and we are currently doing a joint Christmas trip with The Network, another association for professional women in Luxembourg. Those are the kind of joint ventures we occasionally set up but this is not a regular occurrence. The

BLC has a rather broad agenda. Most other associations are set up do to one particular thing in one field whilst we tend to do a bit of everything and try to accommodate as many requests as possible. There is a whole team of dedicated people who work hard to make sure all of our activities run smoothly and are of high quality.

In public opinion „expats“ have a reputation of staying within the expat community, the question of integration remains. What is the likelihood of expats connecting and engaging with local residents? How beneficial are expat associations/clubs to integration?

J.I.: There are different opinions when it comes to integration and expat clubs. You have to put yourself out there, whether that is within a club or somewhere else. People have to get to know you, it's all about meeting people, about networking and making connections and then it flows from there. Your first attempts of reaching out risk not getting the expected response but you have to move beyond those setbacks. It may take a third or even a fourth try before you succeed. I will admit this requires a certain willingness and determination to make it happen.

Although doing all this work within the expat community helped me to meet people, it did not necessarily help me with learning the languages because members of the BLC are obviously all English-speakers. But how could I have joined a club in any of Luxembourg's three official languages, when at the time I had not mastered any them? I think that it is perfectly normal to first seek a group that you can easily connect with and then build up from there.

Your degree of integration however also largely depends on your plans for the future. For those who, like my family, plan to stay in Luxembourg long-term, certain questions arise. If at some point for instance you decide to apply for citizenship, you will have to learn Luxembourgish, which, to be honest, I believe we owe this country! Also, as a trailing spouse who seeks to revive their career and reach a comparable position to the one they held prior to relocation, you absolutely have to improve your language skills. This was



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why I decided to take language courses, so that now I speak some French and am studying Luxembourgish. My husband is actually miles ahead of me because he started earlier. He does already speak Luxembourgish quite well. Our son learned all of the country's languages through school. Personally, I have a very varied friendship group. I feel that I have integrated just as well with the British community as I have with the American, the Luxembourgish or any other community. Our family feels very integrated here, we always try to contribute as much as we can and we are always willing to do more as we feel part of this society and I have honestly never experienced any obstacles to this. I have always felt welcome. But our intention to integrate was made very clear from the outset.

The BLC seems to appeal to working women. Your club hosts monthly professional and entrepreneurial women's events. Expat studies however still paint a somewhat traditional picture of trailing spouses following their husbands to another country, often sacrificing their own careers in the process. Does this picture correspond to what you have witnessed within your community?

J.I.: Although I do feel this opinion does exist, I also feel that the time has come to move on from this traditional viewpoint. Take me as an example: although I followed my husband here and gave up my career, I have not stopped working since my arrival in Luxembourg, offering my

pro bono support wherever needed. My friends joke that I might even be overdoing it, and that a 9-5 job would actually be less demanding on me. All of the female volunteers in my team, of whom there are many, work with an admirable amount of professionalism and reliability. They are rare gems.

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With regards to the professional and entrepreneurial women's events, they were launched when I took over as chair with the full support of the committee, because we did not yet have a class of events that appealed to younger career women. This absence was however strongly felt by many of our members as more and more women nowadays maintain a career. Also, working is a good way to build a life in Luxembourg. The ratio of working to non-working women in our club is rather balanced, I would say. Most of the women attending our professional events are however working career women and if they happen to currently not be working, this is only due to the fact that they have either followed their spouses, have small children, are non-EU nationals or simply still have to make their way and

build a foundation here. Back in my home country I had a working history but how was I supposed to prove that here?

Having spent my early professional career in the field of female empowerment, launching the professional and entrepreneurial events felt like the next logical step and my efforts were definitely well received by all our members. I have always been an advocate for women and I would rather have mothers coming with their child than have them not attend an event or be excluded. We are heading into an entrepreneurial era where women should have a seat at the table so I am glad to see that the business events series we have launched here at BLC have already become a signature initiative of the club.

Thank you very much!
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