

A Home Leave Diary

By: Robin Pascoe

Day One

Did I honestly think I would find the time write in this travel journal during Home Leave? In between my terrible jet lag, a boring visit with Great Uncle Charles who I scarcely remember (and my children have never met), or making a fuss about still another friend's newly renovated kitchen, the only free time is when our laundry is drying and even that's stressful because it's been a long time since I had to do the laundry myself. Forget ironing. Wrinkled clothing has to be in style or I will make it so. Onward to the stores!

Day Two

Shopping was so exhausting and the multitude of consumer choices so mind boggling that I just got over a major crying jag. The sight of a year's worth of newly-purchased cotton underwear for the entire family piled high in the corner of my brother's spare bedroom which is our command post during our leave isn't helping matters. There are so many shopping bags filled with stuff that I can barely remember buying. My sister-in-law thinks I'm crazy. She can't understand that we can't buy underwear or our favourite mustard where we are living. But then, she hasn't asked any questions about where we are living so how would she know? Easier to just sit, eat and drink all night. I'm sleeping badly.

Day Three

Hubby called to say he won't be joining us as planned! I want to strangle him especially as we move on next to his parents' house and without him there as a buffer, I know what will happen. I will go out and use the VISA card without demonstrating the least restraint. That will irritate him!

Day Four

Had a breakfast visit with one friend, coffee with a former work colleague (waste of time!), lunch with a cousin, tea with an aunt, and dinner with the kids and in-laws. Thank goodness for gin. Tomorrow I repeat the cycle.

Day Five

I can't believe how bad things have gotten here at home. When did everyone get so busy? You ask someone how they are, and they answer, with pride, that they are really terribly busy. Does that make them feel important? Trying to line up visits is like organizing a diplomatic summit. And the cancelling at the last minute! Well, forget it. I'm here for just ten days and if they want to see me, they will have to make time to come to me.

Day Six

Spent the entire day in the rented car, lost in the countryside, trying to find a cottage that is definitely not on any map. Why didn't I make these friends come to me? I'm still jet lagged. Up at least five pounds already. Jeans tight. Need to buy new ones.

Day Seven

Had a big fight last night with hubby over the phone. He's still too busy to get away. He doesn't believe what I told him his mother said to me. I'm going shopping again. But first, I have to have tea (and more cake I'm sure!) with my mother-in-law's friends who want to see the children.

Day Eight

I can't believe I spent months looking forward to this leave. Maybe it isn't so bad back there. I'm not sure I can live here again. Can't wait to leave. Up another two pounds overnight! Almost bought a pack of cigarettes today but resisted. No one smokes here.

Day Nine

I have had it! I leave tomorrow for home, wherever that is because I thought this was home. Very confusing. The children are also confused but will spend another few weeks at a summer camp whether they like it or not.

Day Ten

En route back to posting. What a relief. I can't do up my pants. The luggage was overweight and I had to pay extra. Too bad. Now that it's over, I think maybe I was too harsh on my family. They were just trying to be nice. They just don't understand my expat life. I must write them when I get back and make my apologies for being so rude and short tempered. Next year, I will pull myself together and behave better. Who am I kidding?

The diary is fictitious, but the experience is almost universal. An expatriate family on Home Leave usually involves too much baggage, too many bad mattresses to sleep on, too many shopping bags, and never enough sleep.

Of course, Home Leave is really intended to allow expats time to reconnect to friends and family and in theory, that's a good idea. Home Leave can be a wonderful experience. However, what is typically overlooked is: jet lag, reverse culture shock, cramped guest rooms, too many people to see, and a ready willingness to inconvenience oneself constantly even after travelling thousands of miles. Smart, experienced Home Leavers know to put the shoe on the other foot: they make people come to them; they rent a place to stay to avoid cramped guest quarters, and they schedule time for walks or quiet time without visiting and eating.

Once it's over, and the honeymoon feelings of relief of being back abroad wear off, how does one recover? Here are a few tips:

- Put the charge cards away. This is the easiest task since there couldn't possibly be any spending limit left anyway;
- Get on the internet and find places to rent next year within easy travelling distance of relatives who will be informed they will be coming to you or else;
- Recognize that like any holiday, good or bad, when Home Leave is over there will be a natural let down;
- Go on a strict diet so you can get into the clothes made tight from weeks of non-stop eating and drinking;
- Go back to the gym.
- Finally, plan an exotic Christmas holiday that has nothing to do with home, family, or relatives of any kind!

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