

## Combating the Culture Shock

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**By: Robin Pascoe**

The lifestyle, insularity and unofficial class system of expat living can cause a unique and unexpected culture shock at first.

They say some events in life are unforgettable, like a first love, a first job or the birth of a first child. I will never forget my first expatriate fancy dress ball. My husband probably won't forget it either. He's still mad at me.

While he was feeling posh wearing a tailor-made tuxedo, he had to endure hearing me moan most of the evening about sitting in uncomfortable evening clothes that are not my style.

I was feeling desperately insecure in the presence of so many beautiful fancy, hand-made ball gowns. Worst of all, I was in fear of the moment we would have to get up and dance (we flunked a ballroom dance course).

I just sat there miserably muttering under my breath. This phoney socialite pageant wasn't part of the deal! Or was it?

Whether it is a cocktail party or a nightly gathering at a local pub with other souls far away from home - who have become instant friends by virtue of just being in the same location - there is an expat lifestyle that can take some getting used to. And there are shocks at both ends of the expat social scale.

"I didn't realise or expect that in expatriate communities there is almost an expat class system," says Nicole Rosenleaf Ritter, former managing editor of an alternative travel-life publishing house called Transitions Abroad. She moved to Prague with her husband last autumn as a self-sponsored expat in order to further her own studies in Eastern Europe.

"There is a gap between corporate expats and self-sponsored expats like us," she says. "And I think that has been the most difficult shock. The experiences of the two are wildly different. Most of the support available for the community focuses on the corporate side.

"For example, I have been going to the American Women's Club. The women are all wonderful and friendly but their problems are definitely different from mine.

"They are trying to find decent five-bedroom homes in Prague, stay busy without work, find a maid or a nanny, while I am trying to afford our tiny two-room flat, negotiate with my new employers and navigate the Czech bureaucracy for permits. It is almost as if we are on different planets."

"Expatriate life can be intoxicating and challenging at best," says Priscila Montana, a cross-cultural trainer who heads her own company, the Dallas-based Cultural Awareness International. "Many expats are lost when confronted by the different expectations that others have of them as expats." Those expectations can include knowing how to entertain, how to dress the part and fitting in with a truly international community that can be more savvy and experienced.

"I advise expats-to-be, certainly corporate families, that the situation will put them up automatically on the social ladder and they must be prepared," she says. "That is not just learning table etiquette but also relates to being a good guest in another country."

Identity is at the core of the culture shock of expat living and profoundly affects that expat class system. Where someone fits into expat social circles is very often based on where that person fits into the organisation or company which employs him or her or sent them abroad. Or does not fit, as the case may be.

Nationalities also play a social role. New expats often find themselves socialising with others from their own countries for no other reason than that they share a flag. They can then find themselves reeling with shock from being with too many fellow countrymen.

Gripping about local people and customs ironically brings some expats together. Everyone indulges in a few good whines from time to time, but when that is all the conversation is about some expats want to ask: "Why do you stay if you can't stand the country or its culture?"

So how does one combat culture shock? For starters, don't think that just because you carry the same passport as someone else you will automatically be friends or indeed have to be friends.

Like all forms of culture shock, you must strive for a period of adjustment which means acceptance. While you may not agree with social snobbery based on position, finance or just how long one has been around, it comes with the territory. Remember that there are snobs at home too. Likewise, there are unwritten class systems too.

Learn to rise above pettiness and gossip. This is a tall order because expat communities can be like small towns for petty grudges and wild rumours. But there is an advantage of living in a mobile community - sometimes the unhappy troublemaker making everyone else's life miserable moves on before you do.

Finally, just as you try to put your outrage on the back burner towards the local customs that make you crazy, it is best to do that with expat circles too. Remember that in all matters of culture there is no right or wrong. Just different.

And that applies to members of an international community who make different choices in the way they choose to live abroad.

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