

Husbands Who Travel

By: Robin Pascoe

My husband used to get positively apoplectic when I would tell him his constant business travel made me feel like a 'single parent without dating privileges'.

But those snide comments were made back in the early days of our repatriation to Canada from our last diplomatic posting. I was still stuck in reverse culture shock, our two young children needed to be settled into new schools, and we had taken ownership of a new puppy so difficult to train I contemplated putting him into my husband's luggage.

Nowadays, as I watch him pack for a trip, I just ask him from which airline 'we' will be collecting points as a result of the latest marathon business journey.

On a recent speaking tour through Europe, I had the opportunity to speak about the challenges of 'moveable marriages' to a variety of expat audiences. When I identified "partners who travel" high on the stress list, I found many soul mates among spouses whose partners move them to a new city, only to take off on business before the shipments arrive (or conveniently, on the actual day the movers turn up at the door). Business travel during an overseas posting is alive and well and still driving many women crazy. They remain behind, keeping the home fires and a heap of resentment burning.

"I knew that there would be traveling involved for my husband when we took the assignment overseas," reports one spouse based in Europe, "but I hadn't given it much thought. We talked about the fact that it was going to be part of the job, but didn't discuss what impact it might have."

"He never used to travel, so this was a huge change compounded by the fact that we were newlywed, new to the country and new to expatriate life. We went from having him not travel at all when we were at home, to having him travel about twice a month for as long as week in some cases. Almost overnight I became this new person I didn't like much who had peaks of anxiety and loneliness when left alone for more than a couple of days."

Most women eventually get used to it, even while bemoaning the perverse law of the universe which states that the minute the partner leaves, something will break or events will go awry. It is, after all, their job. And most women knew in advance what lay ahead.

"It was still a shock to the family to have him gone so frequently," an Asia-based expat spouse told me. "My husband travels about 40% of the time and for such long trips, often over three weekends, which are definitely the worst. He left for his first trip a week after we moved here."

And it's not necessarily easy on the person doing the traveling. "My husband is still in excellent health but the frequent long distance flights sap his energy," says the spouse living in an Asian capital. "When he returns from a long trip, he spends his first few nights at home going to bed right after dinner. Sometimes I wish he would spend a couple of nights at a local hotel to adjust before coming home."

"I can make it through his absences, but having his comatose body home two days ahead of his mind drives me nuts," she says. Since travel is part of the job, what can a spouse do to lessen the stress?

Rita Yee, of ExpatCoach.com, recommends that partners talk beforehand about the impact business travel may have on the family and the relationship.

“Get it all out and be heard,” advises Ms. Yee. “As much as possible, be clear about when the trips are coming and how long they will be since no one likes last minute surprises. The spouse who stays home has to prepare for the trip too. Talking about the travel, rather than ignoring it, will help couples come up with a healthy coping strategy for both pre-departure and during his time away.”

Ms. Yee also offers the following helpful tips to spouses:

- Do make sure you're prepared to handle whatever might come up while he's away. Know who to call right away if a pipe bursts or the car breaks down.
- Let friends and neighbours know you're home alone.
- Don't play Superwoman. If you need extra help with the kids while he's away, reach out and ask. Martyrdom will get you nowhere.
- Don't brood while he's away. Be so engaged in creating a life you love that you don't have time to wallow in resentment.

Finally, Ms. Yee advises that spouses put their own support system in place, especially in expatriate communities where traditional support like family isn't around. That way, she says, when one spouse hits those low spots, she knows who to lean on, knowing she will do the same for her friend the next time around.

This article is reprinted with the kind permission of Robin Pascoe from the archives of www.expatexpert.com