

Living and Working Abroad: It can be the Most Positive Time of Your Life

By: Robin Pascoe

“What’s the most positive thing you can say about living abroad?”

Just for fun I sent out an e-mail posing that query to expats living in a variety of places around the world. The obvious replies came in about overseas life being a time of tremendous personal growth and providing the opportunity to live and travel in diverse regions of the world.

But more honestly to the point, was a reply I received from a woman living in Shanghai: “I love having a maid to do everything for me!” she told me, and not half-facetiously.

For many expats who move to countries for assignments that include big houses, chauffeur-driven cars, and lots of household help, these are indeed the finest perquisites that come with living and working overseas. Having the household drudgery taken away, especially if you are starting families or raising young children who require hours of care giving, can be a priceless perk. Never mind that so often that ordinary housekeeping tasks increases ten fold due to the nature of the city you are living in (dusty places for instance, or cities where grocery shopping can take an entire day), it’s still great to have help you would not otherwise have been able to afford.

I’ll be honest and admit full time help was certainly a huge appeal on our first overseas assignment in Bangkok. I survived my first pregnancy nicely with a maid to prepare healthy meals for me and keep me company when my husband traveled a lot (I sorely missed both when I was carrying our second child living in the Quebec countryside and buried under several feet of snow for most of it!) Not only that, but when our daughter Lilly was born in Thailand, I was able to hand her over into the arms of someone prepared to literally love her to death. A positive of life abroad? I think so.

But there’s certainly more than maid service which attracts people to the good life abroad. Money works well for most people as money generally does. Not only is there more of it with expatriate pay packages and hefty compensation and benefits, but very often, a woman does not feel as obligated to seek a second income for the family since her husband’s paycheque covers everything.

“I really enjoy having the stress of earning money lifted from me,” one wife wrote to me on condition of anonymity. “I would still like to be doing something productive and useful to feed my identity, but not having to be a two income family to enjoy the good ‘expat’ life has been a real bonus. We are even able to save quite a bit of money.” She also told me her husband, like most employees who see a rise in their incomes abroad, certainly agrees that money is a big positive for luring people to live overseas.

Health clubs, when paid for by the sponsoring company and organization, are another positive perk of expat life. Being Canadian, and in particular presently living in my country’s healthiest region on the west coast in British Columbia where recreation centers are as ubiquitous as sushi bars, I wouldn’t feel compelled to move abroad again just for health clubs. But for others who move from cities where going to the gym can be as expensive as paying the mortgage, health clubs are definitely on the bonus side of the balance sheet. When we lived in tough postings like Beijing and Seoul, I don’t think either my husband or I would have survived without the local expat health clubs. Recreational

memberships, as well as being therapeutic, definitely contribute to a higher quality of life in general and certainly a better social life.

“Having the time of your life overseas is largely a matter of having a positive mental outlook, especially when things get challenging,” author Elizabeth Kruempelmann believes.

And she ought to know since she wrote the book on the subject. *The Global Citizen: A Guide to Creating an International Life and Career* (Ten Speed Press) came out in 2002, but Kruempelmann spent many years prior to that gathering her experience, most of it positive.

“I’ve been lucky to enjoy a diversity of experiences in various countries,” she says. “For example, I studied abroad in Denmark the year the Berlin Wall fell, I’ve ridden a camel on the Sahara, an elephant in Nepal, photographed an assortment of impressive wildlife in Zimbabwe and sold advertising in post-Communist Poland where the word advertising had never previously existed!”

Now living in Portugal, Kruempelmann stopped long enough to settle down to write her book, develop a web site (www.the-global-citizen.com) and oh yes, have two babies. She believes there are three main keys to making the overseas experience as positive as possible:

1. Stay flexible

“Living abroad offers so many opportunities to learn, travel, grow, experience the world, and become part of a truly global community of people,” Kruempelmann told me in an interview about her book.

“You want to have lots of fun, learn a ton, meet some great people, see some cool sites, and return home with an experience that will last you a lifetime.” But she also advises that expats should always remember the main reason they chose to move abroad and to hold fast to those goals while absorbing everything possible about daily life.

2. Immerse yourself

“Get actively involved with the locals, the language, and the national culture. The more you assimilate, the more rewarding your time overseas will be. You will learn more from the local people than from any travel guide,” Kruempelmann believes, adding that expats will become more proficient in a foreign language if they speak it at every opportunity.

3. Embrace the global community

The local expat community is a support network. “As you embrace a global lifestyle, meeting people, making friends and staying in regular contact while you are abroad is often the fabric of adventure stories and emotional moments you will remember forever,” says Kruempelmann. She advises expats to maintain the contacts made while on foreign assignment to keep the glow of all those positives shining.

That is definitely solid advice I can vouch for and thanks to the invention of the internet, it’s very easy to do. For if I were to state the most positive aspect of my own fifteen years living abroad as the wife of a Canadian diplomat, it’s the fact that I’m still in regular touch with the many friends I made.

And by the way, I have the most beautifully decorated living room of Asian furniture and art. Good shopping is always a positive.

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