

Moving experiences

By Simon Kuper

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I once travelled around Japan with a British friend who was living there. Each new Japanese problem – why was it impossible to find any address in Tokyo? – made me want to go home. But my friend would look up from the Japanese grammar book that he carried everywhere, try to understand the apparently baffling Japanese reasoning and then interpret it with the most generous spin possible.

He treated the whole country as a friend he had yet to make. I took him for an unpaid PR for the Japanese nation. I now see that he was the perfect expatriate. Many years later, he is still happy in Tokyo.

About 200m people, or 3 per cent of the world's population, already live outside their home countries and relocation continues to rise, particularly this year as recession forces job-seekers to move to markets they might not have considered before. "In the last quarter of 2008 and into 2009, [we have] seen some upturn in moves to countries off the beaten track, such as Libya, Syria, Yemen, Mongolia and isolated areas in China and South America," says Richard Tyrrell of global relocation company Going-there. In crisis-hit Iceland, polls show that one-third of the population is considering emigration. And in London and New York, bankers are joking about a new ultimatum: "Dubai, Mumbai, Shanghai or goodbye."

So, for all those who have recently relocated or expect to soon, here are some tips on how to do it. Some come from expats themselves and some from the professionals who get paid to help them settle.

Know that the unfamiliarity of daily life will initially overwhelm and depress you.

"People think they're going mad when after a month they start getting 'country fatigue'," says Rachel Hall at Paragon Relocation Holland. "You go to the post office in your home country and you're in and out. In a new country you don't know the system. You've brought the wrong bits of paper and it might take you three or four trips before you've got your package sent. You feel stupid and frustrated. It's tiny things happening over and over, which are draining."

Each country presents its own oddities. In Germany, childcare is hard to come by. In the Netherlands, it's hard to arrange for cooked dinners to be delivered. In the US, without an American credit history, you might not get a credit card and without a credit card you will not exist. To survive, emigrate with more official documents than you could possibly need and hire a relocation agent, especially if your company is paying. These people can do everything from putting your tenancy in their names to sitting with you at your rented kitchen table as you burst into tears. "You will do things wrong; it's normal," says Soledad Aguirre of Statim Relocation in Madrid.

"In our intercultural training programmes, there's a classic curve at two or three months, when the excitement has died down and people find themselves in this hole," adds Cathie Estevez of Swift Relocation Service in Munich. "The difficulties of life in a new country have become a reality and they feel they've made a bad mistake. [But] after seven or eight months, people tend to start feeling at home again. Knowing that this will come and that it happens to a lot of people should help you get through it."

Don't go looking for flaws.

I once met a New Zealander who lived in Argentina and couldn't stop talking about Miranda France's book *Bad Times in Buenos Aires*, which characterised Argentinians as angry, vain people who wanted to be Europeans. He understood the caricature but thought it was too easy. You could write a similar book about any country – Brits are stand-offish, Mexicans tardy, etc – but it inevitably simplified and missed the good things about the place. “I just don't see the point,” he said.

You can't compare everything to home. It's irrelevant. “You have to be adaptable,” says Harriet Holden-White, co-director of County Homesearch in Surrey, England. “You can't get upset about little things like not having garbage disposal.”

Craig, a Microsoft employee who moved from Seattle to Paris, advises: “Let go of expectations. Something that was foreign to me in France was the socialism. I had no idea that people had the right to go on strike all the time. If you arrive with your mind like a blank page, you will be more accepting of differences.”

Understanding your new country is your project. Work at it constantly.

“You need curiosity,” says Vladimir Filin of Vision Relocation Services in Moscow. “You have to be interested to find things out about Russian culture and why things are this way.” Marie Berne, a French oenologist in Hong Kong, says: “Absorb information everywhere you go. Watch people. Drop your superior point of view and learn the others' logic and values. On the tram in Hong Kong, if you keep your eyes open, you notice that people pay when they get off, for example.”

When you meet new people, suck them dry for anecdotes and advice instead of moaning about your own bad experiences. You will inevitably miss certain social rules in the new country. When you learn the rules, you will understand the locals better and they will treat you better. “One woman from New York spent the first six weeks being rude to everyone in her office without realising because she didn't know she had to say ‘hello’, ‘please’, ‘thank-you’ and ‘sorry’ as much as we do [in the UK],” Holden-White says. A Dutch lawyer in New York learnt not to make jokes featuring himself as a loser. And expats in Paris quickly realise they should never enter their local café dressed in sweaty jogging clothes.

Yes, you have to learn some of the new country's language.

“The language is fundamental,” says Martine Ruiz, manager of MRI Relocation in Lyons, France. Otherwise even calling a plumber will be a torment.

How to learn it? Make a lot of time. Take a Berlitz course before you leave. Invest in audio or video tapes. Find a small local language school, many of which are quite good. Hire a personal tutor. Carry a bilingual dictionary everywhere. Some French teachers in Paris also recommend the “*école horizontale*”, or “horizontal school”; in other words, shacking up with a local. This is also an instant route to meeting native friends, your partner's irritating work colleagues and potential mothers-in-law.

It's your job to make friends.

“They matter even more abroad than at home,” says Kirsten Høgh Thøgersen, a clinical psychologist living in Shanghai. “Prior to relocation, your identity was structured by well-known surroundings; in the international community it is primarily friendships that hold you together.”

The best time to make friends is often right after moving, when you have shed the social constraints of your old home and still feel free. Exploit this feeling because it won't last. Introduce yourself to neighbours while you can still say you've just moved in.

Pursue a hobby or invent one. "We ask relocatees what they do in their own countries. 'Do you like to walk, go to the gym, listen to music, do yoga, paint?'" Aguirre says. "In every western country, you can find people who do the same thing as you."

By getting out more, you will discover that most locals are not some exotic "other" but ordinary people muddling along much like yourself. This in itself can be reassuring. That said, don't expect many of them to befriend you. Most adults living in their home countries are not desperate to meet strangers with language problems. It's up to you to make the effort. Give people incentives – throw a dinner party, scavenge concert tickets or offer to babysit – but don't sit around expecting them to phone.

It's often easier to meet expats, as most of them need friends too. Do not feel guilty about this. Even if you yearn to embrace the new culture, you will sometimes need to spend time with compatriots so as to feel like yourself again.

Maintain rituals.

"I brought my duvet cover, which is symbolic of home," says Berne. Or keep a subscription to your favourite magazine. Syd Harris, a naval architect who moved from Norfolk, England, to Jakarta, says: "I looked up the BBC World Service frequencies before I left and ended up being able to listen to the football scores on my radio before work. I'd always have BBC Five Live on in the mornings at home. Then, in the evenings, I'd go on the internet and read [Sunderland football club fanzine] A Love Supreme to see how my team were doing."

These home rituals will ground you. But so will adopting new ones in your new country. Find the friendliest café, bookshop or market stall and drop in often. Eventually you will notice familiar faces, talk to people and perhaps even feel like a local. "I remember the first time the bloke in the corner shop shook my hand," says Alec Beardsell, a Briton who teaches at the International School of Paris. "It was a symbolic moment. I'd made it. I wasn't a tourist any more!"

Be kind to your spouse and older children.

The employee being relocated usually has the easiest time of it. "Say they work for Citibank," Aguirre explains. "When they go into the office in London, Spain or Argentina, the colours are the same, the chairs are the same and you feel at home immediately. [But] this is not the case for the family."

For partners who have left careers, Hall's advice is to "avoid looking for an exact follow-on job; reassess your skills, experience and knowledge and think of them in a broader light". It is also important to network before you travel. Tell everyone – friends, family, colleagues – where you're going. Someone will know someone there.

As for kids, "parents shouldn't stress about little children; they adapt very easily," Ruiz says. But worry about the teenagers. They will be leaving close friends at home and face the stress of fitting in.

One option is to leave the family behind but, according to Filin, it's a risky one. "If a man's wife does not come with him to Moscow, things can be difficult," he says. "Russian girls are pretty ."

Remember you might just grow as a person.

This goes beyond just learning a language and the techniques required to humour, say, Parisians or Thais. As Thøgersen says, expats gain “self-awareness, an increased ability to cope with change and motivation for learning”. Adds Filin: “If you do well in Russia, you can do well anywhere.”

Living abroad can also help you understand your home country. Suddenly, you see it from the outside. To quote Rudyard Kipling, the great poet of relocation: “And what should they know of England who only England know?”

Know yourself.

Perhaps you shouldn't move. “Who shouldn't relocate? Someone who wants their life to stay the same. Someone who's not able to deal with change,” Hall says. Also, don't move if you have no interest in the new country. The differences would only irritate you.

Beware. If all goes well, you may become a serial expat and never go home again.

Your mother might not like it.

Additional research by Pauline Harris