

CHAPTER 5

Expatriation can lead to a better life

Expatriation often comes as a job promotion. It is usually therefore excellent news and a statistically great career move for an employee who receives this offer. Financially, an expatriation is also often an opportunity to offer the family privileged living conditions: children will likely have access to international school, housing will certainly be subsidised or free to compensate for the cost of living, and health insurance is often included. The bonus or hardship allowance enables you to enjoy the country you are living in to the fullest, and often gives you the opportunity to take wonderful trips to see the surrounding area and explore your new home. It is also an opportunity to save money and invest for your future. For example, many expats save for a nice retirement or to provide a good education for their children.

Quality versus quantity...

Expatriation is also an opportunity to enjoy a very good quality of life. In many countries, you can choose to have help at home, which gives you more time to spend with your family and friends, or to do things that you would not have the time to do if you had to take care of everything on your own.

We have always lived in emerging countries, where it is common to have help at home. I have always seen this form of employment to be a positive exchange that benefits both the locals and my family.

Let's not forget that the salary we pay to our employees will allow them to support their families. Every penny is necessary for them, so knowing what they will earn is a priority for them.

I remember coming across expat families who were surprised to have the question of salary and holidays in the first questions of the interview. Although I understand that this may seem awkward on the part of the employee, I think it is important to understand their life and their needs. The conditions that will make them choose to work for your family may not be the same as those you might think.

If seeing an employee leave can feel like a betrayal from an expatriate family, I think it is important not to take this departure personally but to eventually put yourself in that person's shoes and try to understand the underlying reasons/needs for this decision.

Personally, what I appreciate most about having this valuable help is that I can really choose which tasks I want to keep and delegate those that do not give me any or less gratification. This freedom has allowed me to have a lot of time for myself and also to be very available for my children when they need it. This is a real luxury that I think is recognised and appreciated by most expatriate parents.

I can never thank all the nannies who have worked with us, being so kind and dedicated to my children and to our family. Their good mood, dedication and flexibility have always been part of the positive atmosphere in our house.

I was always lucky to have wonderful help at home. Julie has been with us since our first day in the Philippines, and until today, eight years later, here in Dubai. She takes care of everything in the house. My children can see that and have also learned to be extremely respectful and grateful for everything Julie does for them. She has seen them grow up and also feels very attached to them. They have also developed their own relationship, I often hear them laughing, getting organised, and this bond is important for Julie who has left her own two children in her home country. If our helper transforms our daily life, we must never forget how complicated hers is and the frequent and serious sacrifices they are making to support their own family.

Constantin always tells me that the day he goes to university, he will take Julie with him. Julie cooks like a Michelin star chef, and has taken his diet very seriously. Constantin is very dedicated to go-karting and needs a special diet. For seven years now she has taken care to always cook the exact food and quantity that 'her boy', as she calls Constantin, is allowed. He is extremely grateful to her.

I think the secret to keeping our precious helpers around is also to treat them as we would like to be treated, with respect and courtesy, like a member of our family.

This help gave me, what is in my opinion, the greatest luxury of expatriation: *time*. Time to have the freedom to do what you want to, when you want to. If at the beginning of expatriation you feel like you have been presented with a blank sheet of paper, a fresh start and a new life, very soon you will begin to draw the life you have always dreamed of.

Habits that will take your expat experience to the next level...

As I left for West Africa twenty-five years ago, I did not know what my tomorrow would be like, and this was destabilising and disorientating. Now, I wake up every morning with a real sense of excitement to be able to use my days to do all the things I have decided and organised to do. To live them to the fullest exactly as I want. At first I was a little unsettled to have such freedom in my daily life, but now I am so grateful to be completely in control of my life. This is something that I have only managed to do through practicing and perfecting a few habits that are essential to life as an expatriate.

Another objective with this book is to show as many women who have been invited to experience expatriation as possible that this thrilling and pleasurable adventure really is accessible to all who wish to seek it for themselves. By being curious, by meeting people, by being grateful for what you are experiencing, and by being patient and tolerant, you can have a successful expatriation.

Having said that, if you've ever agreed to go abroad, it is because you're already curious, curious to see what's going on elsewhere.

Curiosity...

My curiosity has always been my ally and my driving force. Thanks to this curiosity, my self-confidence has grown and allowed me to live a number of extraordinary experiences. My curiosity encouraged me to reach out to others, to explore the culture of every host country and to understand everything that was happening around me on a daily basis. This curiosity first helped me to get closer to each country and a fortiori to integrate more quickly.

The Philippines was my second expatriation on the Asian continent since I had lived in Indonesia a few years earlier. What I have learned about the Indonesian culture did not help me to understand the Philippines' history and civilization. Two very different cultures due to two distinct historical pasts. When I arrived in the Philippines, I was quickly surprised that only the elders still speak Spanish but the younger generations only speak English. For those who had the chance to go to school, their level of English is actually very high due to the influence of the Americans in the country. I found Filipinos to be extremely hospitable, religious, kind, devoted, optimistic, they never say no and will always smile despite the heavy and painful past of their countries history. These are some Filipino traits that often leave foreigners perplexed. Personally, I was really curious to understand the history of the Philippines and the impact of this past on their culture, their behaviour and their language.

The Museum Volunteers (MVP) of the Philippines understood the importance of sharing their history in order to encourage a better understanding of the country and its people's philosophy. The MVP is still organizing a school year course covering major historical events in the Philippines. These topics are often presented by Filipinos who themselves lived through these periods or who are direct descendants of the people who made Philippines history. Topics cover key episodes from the pre-colonial period up to the modern day- and this course has always been very popular with expatriate women to better understand and immerse themselves in their host country.

This kind of integration and understanding of historical events that shape a current society is very important in expatriation. Your efforts to learn the history and past struggles of the host country will be appreciated and will contribute to an overall integration into the country and connection to its people.

Social life...

Speaking the language, understanding and living the culture in which you settle is also a way to get closer to the locals and to be enriched by this experience. For me,

connection with people is essential. Whether they are expatriates or locals, building a social life has always been absolutely essential to me- it is a requirement for my survival.

In Mexico we were lucky enough to be fully immersed in local Mexican life. We chose to live in a residence mainly inhabited by Mexicans and our children went to school with their children. Our friends were mostly Mexican; we were invited to their family parties in their family haciendas.

When I arrived in the Philippines, I was still so attached to Mexican culture that I immediately joined an extraordinary group of Latin expatriate women in Manila: 'club de damas latinas'. It just so happened that the first event in September was the Mexican National Day luncheon, and I decided to open my house to host the luncheon and I received sixty Spanish-speaking women in my house. For the record, it was one of the most beautiful luncheons I have ever hosted, but more importantly, I was now a part of this group. I had made myself known, I had taken the first step to go to this group that attracted me. Among these women, I made friendships that lasted the time of my expatriation to the Philippines, some of whom I am still in contact with today. Of course, you may not meet your best friend at the first lunch, but the important thing is to seize the opportunities when they arise and to develop your social network little by little.

Patience and tolerance...

No one person adapts to a country the exact same way. I have learned over time that patience is a necessary virtue for expatriation. First of all, this is because at the beginning, nothing works the way you want it to, especially because you often arrive with your own cultural criteria that may well be very different from your new reality.

Like any expat, I have experienced my moments of frustration and also moments of loneliness. Even though these frustrations may be caused by issues that seem irrelevant to other people, in your heightened emotional state they can be the thing that tips you over the edge. If at first these situations are discouraging, with time you learn to anticipate them, and later laugh about them.

I cannot tell you how many times I have arrived at a supermarket and not found what I was looking for, either because the product was out of stock or discontinued. In these moments, I have seen many of my peers become frustrated and overwhelmed, even by such a small inconvenience.

I remember when Nesquik was out of stock in our local supermarket in the Philippines - many kids and adults alike were in an uproar - it was a surprisingly emotional affair!

Over time, I have learned to step back from these situations and take them as they come; adopting a flexible attitude and viewing such frustrations as nothing more than additional life experience rather than as a personal attack.

Even if I like to say that expat life is a gift for me, I admit that every moment is not a cherished one either... I know that when we, expats, talk about our past experiences and reflect on our good and bad moments, we laugh about them and we are even more grateful, and happy to have left the bad ones behind us!

This reflection reminds me of a special moment in the Philippines. For all the women who have lived in Manila, I think they will agree with me that until you have had your gifts wrapped at the Landmark, a shopping mall, you have not yet fully immersed yourself in this city and in the Filipino culture. It is a rite of initiation! The wrapping of a gift is done in stages, and each stage by a different employee; one will cut the paper, one will wrap the sides, another the top and so on. It is a painfully slow process; a real lesson in patience and self control. Despite your growing impatience, you know that it would be extremely rude and completely unacceptable to lose your temper!

The attitude of gratitude...

I know that many women like to keep a gratitude journal. Every day they write down what has been positive for them, no matter how small. It's also a way of reflecting on their own life and getting into the habit of appreciating each happy moment and making the experience more and more positive. While I have never done this myself, I can

imagine that it would be an encouraging process; taking things day by day and learning to stop and appreciate the happy moments- things that you are grateful for- in times when you feel uncertain, afraid or like nothing is going right. It is an important step in feeling grounded in a country.

There is an extremely positive and productive energy in expat groups. By joining the various groups, you can really fill your days, weeks and weekends with activities and people that inspire you and bring you joy.

Our real responsibility in joining these groups is our attitude and commitment. As expats, we know that we can quickly feel lonely and unhappy and so we prefer to avoid people who don't transmit that same energy. You need to keep a positive attitude so that you attract others that do the same. However, if you are feeling down, don't stay alone; talk to others, ask for help, you will find that others are currently or have been there and will be happy to share their contacts, their solutions. The only advice I could give you in this book is to take charge of your life, you are really the only one responsible for adapting and immersing yourself as best you can.

I found my place in this journey...

Over the years I have really felt that my life has gradually become more and more rewarding, exciting and thrilling. By trusting my instinct and curiosity, I focused on what interested me and made me happy.

This active and open-minded attitude has always given me the confidence to remain open to the opportunities that each country has to offer. Learning I had undertaken in a first country was often no longer relevant in the next, and I had to start again. This gave me the opportunity to try many things, and I must admit that I still love it.

When I lived in Africa, the price of gold and silver was very affordable. At that time, I already liked to design jewellery and I had started working with a Senegalese jeweller named Touba. Touba had a small workshop on the side of a barely paved road. It was around twenty metres squared, lit by one or two neon lights, and a few display cases on

a dirt floor. You could see that he had been working for many years on his beautiful jeweller's workbench, well rounded so that he could rest his arms comfortably and his recovery skin, for the gold and silver dust, on his lap. With only a few tools and a blowtorch, it was amazing to see what he could achieve with so little material. I loved going to see him, picking up simple but beautiful pieces, and talking with him. I learnt a lot from him, not only about jewelry but also about traditions and the muslim culture in Africa. Cotonou was predominantly catholic, however I remember that at the time of Ramadan, as is traditional, people around me were offering a sheep to their muslim friends when they felt appreciation for them. I was happy to do the same for Touba. He would share this sheep with his friends and family. Touba is one of the marvellous encounters that made me love my years in Cotonou so much.

When you spend lots of time in a place, you naturally develop relationships with the people who are part of your daily life. Whether it's the fruit vendor, the bookseller, the baker or anyone else. At the beginning, it's a smile, then two or three words. Together, we were talking about their life, often about their family, I was simply interested in them. As time passes, we gradually get closer to this country and its inhabitants who welcome us so warmly. A connection like the one I found in Touba, I've found in every destination. Unfortunately, these are the people you will lose when you leave the country, but I could never forget that they formed a part of my life during the years I spent living in their country.

When I arrived in Jakarta, I went from a small city on the west coast of Africa to an Asian megapolis. I naturally gave up jewellery making and moved on without regret. It was part of another life, another experience. In expatriation I think it is important not to compare your present life with what you have experienced elsewhere. I feel that each experience deserves to be lived in its own right.

Expatriation is a dynamic way of life...

In twenty-five years of expatriation, I have become a mother of two. Until the birth of Constantin, I had never held a baby in my arms for the simple reason that I had never

had small children around me. The experience of motherhood was therefore totally new to me, and has been a fundamental part of my journey, of how I found my place. Despite the geographical distance from my friends and family, I was lucky enough to naturally quickly gain confidence and felt extremely happy and serene with my new little family. It was only when I arrived in Indonesia in 2003 that I was really able to start communicating via the internet, email and Skype. Connectivity was way faster than in Africa and despite the time difference between me and my friends and family, we could communicate easily. Thanks to this new form of communication, we all felt less distant from each other, which drastically changed the isolation theme for expatriates.

I was happy to realize that as the years went by, I had established a new life; my own life. I had created my new bubble in which I was more than happy. I had a lot of responsibilities again, both on a personal and family level. I felt like I was really in control of my life, or at least in control of what I could control. I felt fulfilled and really felt like I was in the right place at the right time.

This, I understand, is not an experience unique to me. Many of my expat friends have similarly found fulfilment in their nomadic lives. Not long ago I asked my friend Caroline how she spent her days in her new country of expatriation and she answered with a sentence that I found so beautiful, "I am busy being happy".

As I write these lines I realise how much pleasure (and nostalgia) I get from looking back and reflecting on the different stages of my expatriate life. I have a good sense of how things have worked out and realise how much life has rewarded my efforts. All the opportunities I have experienced woke up facets of my personality that were previously latent. I have accumulated positive and very rewarding experiences that have made me grow and become the person I am today.

In my case, going expatriate was to leave a life that was probably all mapped out and stable to seek a life rich in experience and adventure. It was all worth it.

Thank you, Alex!

Expatriation is your opportunity to live your life the way you want...

Expatriate life is an opportunity to take the time to do what you usually don't have time to do. While some people get bored on holiday, others may need a holiday after their holidays as they get stuck into so many activities. The same goes for expatriate life: what you decide to do with it is again a matter of choice, attitude and personality.

It is interesting to see how a small change in attitude can totally change life experiences. Living and working away from home can be a real challenge, some challenges and obstacles that cannot be avoided, however, it's in our hands to choose the attitude we take to this situation. We can decide to see it as an opportunity to learn something new or to be the victim of these frustrations. This change of attitude will make all the difference!

Believe me, expatriation transforms. It makes us grow and open up to others!

The more we travel the world, the more we feel connected, belonging to this world that we are taming more and more! You start to feel good everywhere you go and above all you connect easily with people of all nationalities wherever you are. How many times have we found people from nationalities and cultures we know, with whom we can communicate in their language, use their expressions, tell them that we know their country or even their city. This direct contact with people is all part of the magic of expat life!

Our experiences enrich us and develop our self-confidence. As I said earlier, our only responsibility is to decide where to start. Each expatriate has their own pace, it is not a race and there are no winners. There is no competition, there is no sequence to follow. In expatriation, you mingle with people of all ages who simply have the same interest as you do at the same time. Age is not an obstacle in expatriation.

I like to remember my bridge games on Mondays in Brazil. I have always loved card games, and in Brazil I wanted to join a group of women bridge players. Every Monday, taking turns to be at each other's houses, we met between eight and fifteen women aged between twenty-five and sixty-five. The most experienced ones patiently taught us the rules of the game and very quickly our Monday meetings became unmissable; friendly, warm and filled with laughter.

Again, great friendships with women who for some had already walked the path that we, as young expats, were setting out upon. We enjoyed listening to their experiences and their advice, we liked their stories which were often similar to those we could have heard during a family reunion.

If some had their children in boarding school, others were celebrating the end of their children's studies or were already starting to organise their elders' weddings. At the same time we, the youngest, were starting to have children! These were differences that in fact brought us closer together. Being part of such groups, feeling that we give as much as we receive is also a way to feel as if we are valued and important.

Once again, this experience shows how important it is to trust your instincts and leave all your prejudices behind. You may be surprised!

Be open to new emotions, get out of your comfort zone and live fully this adventure that is offered to you!

Reflections...

To help identifying what is valuable for you in the expatriation life, I invite you to reflect on these questions:

- Apart from moving countries, what might be / what might be the greatest change for you if you were/ are living an expat life?
- What impact do you foresee this change having on your life?
- What one experience shared so far resonates most with you?