

Expatriate Assignments: Are You Addicted?

If you love living abroad, you see your passport more than your home country, you enjoy a much-envied lifestyle and you hate the thought of repatriating, there is a good chance that you, like many expats before you, have been seduced by the addictive nature of international assignments.

So what exactly is it that makes such assignments so addictive? The answers are many and varied, but here are six of the big ones:

1. Money And Lifestyle

Expats sent abroad by their employer usually earn a very attractive salary and lead a very good lifestyle.

If they didn't, what initial incentive would they have to uproot their partners, families and/or belongings in the first place?

Expatriate assignments are typically characterised by: exciting work travel; increased means and opportunity for personal travel; the financial ability to indulge in a dining-out culture; first-class education for accompanying children; and higher-quality leisure time – thanks, more often than not, to less personal responsibility for home maintenance and more money to indulge in exciting leisure-time pursuits.

Joe Hepworth, a Brit in Dubai, who has lived abroad in eight countries, explains it like this: "International assignments are something you naturally want to prolong/repeat... [due to] the ability to enjoy a lifestyle beyond your normal means at home and the enjoyment of living and working in different environments".

2. Excitement

Living abroad and immersing yourself in a foreign culture offers potentially endless stimulation and a true feast for the senses.

This is best summed up by Marcus Jenkins, a British expatriate in Spain and co-author of *Going Native in Murcia*, who has lived in Hong Kong, China and Germany. Marcus describes expatriate life as "an almost inexhaustible supply of novelty".

It follows then that repatriation, in comparison, would be like visiting a small-town museum when you have just seen the wonders of Disneyland.

3. Challenge

Few experiences compare to the high-intensity challenges that expats encounter overseas.

On a personal level, there are cultural adjustment issues, language barriers to overcome (often) and an urgent need to build new social support networks.

On a professional level, there are increased pressures and responsibilities at work, plus a rapid need to prove that your competence matches your salary.

These dynamic challenges combine to produce an exhilarating cocktail that either leaves you with a stinging hangover, or a perpetual love of the chase.

Richard Henry, executive principal of Global Jaya school, is an Australian who has been working in Jakarta for eight years. Richard professes: "I am sure that one year in my job is the equivalent of ten years in a similar job back home... but if I am honest, it is that very same stimulation that keeps me here."

Yvonne McNulty, founder of TheTrailingSpouse.com is an Australian in Singapore and a leading authority on expat return on investment. Yvonne adds: "I think what makes expat assignments addictive is the empowerment one gets from facing so many challenges and being successful – including overcoming the failed moments and crises.

"You come out stronger and you emerge bolder... I believe what that does is make you feel a little bit invincible and prepared to take even more risks... you want to put all that into practice and do it again."

4. Elevated Status

Rightly or wrongly, many expats are given an elevated status abroad. This comes sometimes via greater authority in the workplace, sometimes simply due to a distinctively non-local physical appearance and other times from a multitude of different reasons.

It is easy for an expat to develop a penchant for this new-found sense of importance, because who doesn't like feeling special?

Simon Harris, a Brit in Spain and author of *Going Native in Catalonia* offers: "[Expat living] certainly is addictive. I came to Barcelona 20 years ago and was quickly seduced by the climate, food and drink, and the lifestyle... speaking Catalan so well [now] makes me something of a celebrity... this means that it's easy to make friends and I have a much more positive view of myself than I did when I was [back home]."

5. Great People

Like many things in life, it is the people that can make the real difference.

Expats on assignment routinely meet people from all over the world that are both "interesting" and "interested" in each other's travels and experiences.

This understandably makes for lively and engaging conversations in a gathering of like-minded people. Again, this is difficult to replicate back home in suburbia.



Ruta Puskorius, a Lithuanian-American who recently moved from Mexico to Turkey for her husband's position with the International Finance Corporation comments: "I love being an expat because of the fascinating people I meet and the friendships that form.

"Everyone is in the same situation... so friendships form fast and furiously, crossing cultural, racial, religious, and political boundaries..."

Rebecca Grappo, founder of RNG International Educational Consultants, an American repatriate who has lived in nine countries, agrees: "One thing that I know I will really miss is the wide variety of interesting people that we get to meet.

"Perhaps the hardest thing about going home again after living abroad is that quite frankly, nobody really cares about all your adventures."

6. No Incentive To Repatriate

Repatriation can be exciting to look forward to, but like returning to school after a summer vacation, once you have been reassured that your friends still love and remember you, you are already planning your next escape.

Kimberly Vierra, Senior Consultant at ORC Worldwide, is an American who lived in Vietnam and now lives in Singapore. Kimberly corroborates: "There are two key reasons why expatriates have difficulty repatriating. One: We want to use what we have learned overseas when we return home.

"Unfortunately, my experience as a practitioner involved in global mobility is that the majority of returnees are not assigned to jobs that recognise or utilise their international experience effectively. Two: Because we have been "changed" by our international experience, we can never return 'home' and pick up where we left off."

An Eternal Expat

Someone once said to me: "Once an expat, always an expat, even if you repatriate. It gets in your blood and you won't be able to shake it."

In hindsight, I think there is a lot of truth to my friend's confession

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About the Author

Andrea Martins is the Director and Co-Founder of **ExpatWomen.com** – a comprehensive, global website dedicated to helping women living overseas. The site displays 1,000+ quality content pages, over 900 expat women blogs, 200+ readers' stories, invaluable country resource pages, interviews with successful expat women, loads of motivational articles and an inspirational blog and monthly newsletter.

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