

SERIAL EXPAT

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Everybody has a unique story to tell. Somebody who has regularly holidayed overseas often has many interesting insights to offer, and amusing anecdotes to relay, but, if you want a really unique story, then you need somebody who has lived in more than one country. The expat not only faces the same challenges as the tourist, but also has to deal with the mundane aspects of life such as getting the phone connected, paying bills, getting kids into school, and so on – a situation that is made worse if they happen to be in a non-English speaking country. The expat has tales of woe to complement the tales of joy.

So what of my story? Well, at the end of 2003, I qualify for my third passport if I'm actually interested in it, and that puts me in a minority group, even by expat standards. I have now lived and worked in four countries, and visited a good many others, and it's not beyond the realms of possibility that I'll add a fifth to the list before returning to Australia. However, I'm getting ahead of myself; best to start at the beginning:

I suspect that my desire to keep on the move (*itchy foot syndrome*, as my mother puts it) was pretty much guaranteed from an early age. Born in London in 1965, I had lived in Kent, back in London, Norfolk, and London again before I was 10 years old. Then, after a fairly stationary 9 years, I accepted a job some 100 miles away in Cheltenham (to a Londoner, 100 miles is a weekend trip!), and my first real experience of having to stand on my own two feet as it were. That's where the story really starts.

Australia Bound

After little more than a year, in what turned out to be an extremely dull civil service job, I was already looking around for new horizons. As I look back on it now, it seems strange that the prospect of moving to Australia held no more concern for me than that of returning to London, or some other part of Britain. Anyway, that was the ultimate decision; I would move to Australia. I should add that this was not completely blind – I have distant relatives in Albany in the South West whom we had visited on past occasion. I guess my main motivation at the time was a combination of a lousy job, miserable British weather, and lovely Australian sun. Of course, the UK was just embarking upon its obsession with shows like *Prisoner*, and *Neighbours* at the time, so there may have been some minor influence there, too!

So, I got the forms, filled them in, sent them off (with a large cheque), and waited. A surprisingly short three months later, I was looking at a new residents visa in my passport. I wasted little time in putting my affairs in order, and in April of 1988, I became yet another Pommy migrant to arrive on the shores on the southern land.

Sydney was experiencing its worst rain in God knows how long, according to the TV – and a glance out of the window certainly offered no contradiction. An auspicious start, maybe, but I'd never intended to stay there. If it were big city life I was looking for, I'd have probably just returned to London for a fresh start, instead of going half way around the world. So, with suitcase in hand, I jump on the Indian-Pacific for a 3-day journey out west. Fortunately, the aforementioned relatives were good enough to put me up when I arrived, and a couple of weeks later, I'd found a place to rent, sharing with two others.

The hunt for employment turned out to be more of a challenge than I'd expected: With a background in computers and electronics, I'd managed to find the one city on the planet that had more IT professionals, than jobs to accommodate them. To make matters worse, getting a job in the Perth market was very difficult if you didn't know somebody! It took me almost 12 months to find a proper fulltime job, and I filled in the time either bludging, working in a bar, or taking TAFE courses in broadcasting (I actually have more qualifications in that field than any other!).

Having finally achieved a level of stability, life settled into some sort of routine, which largely involved the pub where I had previously worked. For some reason, I found myself a lot more active than I had been in England. Don't ask me why; maybe it was friends, maybe it was the climate, maybe something else. It's not like there was more to do in WA, than in England, it's just that I had more of an inclination to do it; golf, water skiing, a brief fling with surfing, and ice skating. The latter wouldn't be the most obvious activity to spring to mind when living in one of the warmer places in the world, so naturally, that's the one I really got stuck into, culminating with being recruited for a hockey team by a work colleague!

Over time, the staff at the pub moved on, and the Burswood Casino gradually replaced it as my regular social haunt, and it was there that I met my wife, Krissy. We were married on Easter weekend in 1997, in the Victoria Gardens near the WACA, so of course Perth experienced its worst Easter rain in 30 years! Our children, Michael and Alexander, were born in quick succession, and by 1999 we were the average family.

Australia to England

It was around this time that the feet started to itch again. I'd already been entertaining thoughts of looking for another job, but there wasn't an awful lot in Perth. On the other hand, demand in Europe had been high, and potential money was very attractive. In addition, Krissy had never been outside of Australia.

England it was, then. Naturally, the decision wasn't made quite that lightly. We discussed possibilities, looked at potential employment opportunities, researched living costs, and so on, and eventually came up with a plan: Spend three years working in Europe, initially in London, but hopefully a period on the continent too; use our free time to travel and see some of the sights; and be back in Perth in time for the eldest child to start school. Visas were not a problem as the kids qualified for British passports, and Krissy could have a spouse visa for a meagre AU\$600!

All the preparations for departure were fairly routine. We obtained the relevant paperwork, got our airline tickets, notified all the official bodies that we were off, and I gave in my notice. It's interesting to note that, at my farewell gathering, one of my past managers made the comment that we were brave to embark upon this venture – at the time, I had no idea just how prophetic that was.

Before leaving Australia, we had tried to get things in place ready for our arrival. Unfortunately, the employment agencies wouldn't do anything other than take my CV and suggest I call when we arrived, even though I could have given them a definite arrival date, and so on. Finding somewhere to live presented similar problems. Anyway, we eventually arrived in London at the beginning of November 1999, and the rather unwelcome experience of having to wait a couple of hours in the freezing cold whilst the hire car company worked out how to fit the child seats in our car. It had been 30+ degrees when we left, it was about 3 or 4 when we arrived, and a shock to the system for all of us, even me, and I'd been expecting it.

We had assumed it was going to take a week or two for us to get our bearings, as it were, and then things would settle down, and we'd be getting on with it. We were wrong.

Firstly, we found it next to impossible to find a place to rent. Everywhere we went, we were met with the same question: 'Who's your employer?' It seemed that without one, getting a place was just not an option, even when we offered to pay 6 months rent in advance. Had we been on the dole, we'd have had more luck... Meanwhile, I was discovering just how badly I'd misjudged the employment market. Remember that this was just prior the mythical Y2K 'end-of-the-world', and whereas companies had been hiring like mad at the beginning of the year, by November, they'd battened down the hatches and were waiting for the storm. Reluctantly we imposed ourselves on my aunt. It was something we'd hoped to avoid as she's

retired, and was probably not ready to have a young family running around her house. However, we were optimistic that it wouldn't be for long since there had been a couple of nibbles on the work front.

The days turned to weeks, and before we knew it, Christmas was upon us. Not only that, but the money we'd bought with us was running down a lot quicker than we'd anticipated. The situation was not looking good. Fortunately, we had purchased return tickets in case things got really dire, and we decided that it would be best if Krissy and the children returned to Perth until I managed to find work. Thus, shortly after New Year I was at the airport, waving farewell to my family.

Back on the employment trail, I was learning fast. I had already made the mistake of declining an offer to be put forward for one position, because a different agency had led me to believe that the role they had for me was in the bag, and I wasn't going to make that mistake again. I was applying for just about everything, and not putting any constraints on myself. I even expanded my search to all of Europe.

It Never Rains, But It Pours

Then, suddenly, toward the end of February, things started happening. I had an initial consultancy that would have led to a contract had the client chosen to proceed, I was offered a contract in Denmark, and another in The Netherlands. I think the latter had quite a bit to do with a friend who put in a good word for me, but by then, I welcomed all the help I could get. Anyway, the Danish job had an earlier start date, and Krissy had no particular preference, so I accepted the position. However, after only a week, I'd decided it wasn't for me, and told them I'd be leaving. It wasn't a decision I made easily, especially after having spent so much time out of work, but the Dutch job was still open, and I felt it would be better for us as a family.

Tulips From, er, Eindhoven?

Next stop, the Netherlands. Getting myself set up there was fairly easy thanks to help from my friend, and also from the agency who had obtained the contract for me, and it wasn't too long before I'd found a place to rent, and we were making arrangements for the rest of the family to join me. Since we'd exhausted most of our money, this wasn't as soon as I'd have liked, but at least our situation had finally taken a turn for the better.

Living in the Netherlands turned out to be quite easy, and we spent much of our free time hopping on the train (public transport is there far superior to any other I have encountered) and visiting Dutch cities and places of interest. We visited the UK occasionally, had Krissy's mother over to visit (she'd never been out of Australia

either), and even managed a long weekend in Vienna where we experienced their popular Christmas markets. All told, our time in The Netherlands was a very positive and enjoyable experience.

It was not altogether stress free though. As November approached, so did the expiry of Krissy's visa. We had assumed that conversion to an indefinite visa would be fairly routine, but when we checked the requirements, it turned out we were coming up short on the necessary paperwork. The problem was that we were living in Eindhoven at the time, which naturally isn't much use when you are trying to get a British visa renewed. The Home Office had no contingency for people in our situation: British resident, but temporarily overseas. Anyway, we called them for advice, and were told that if we made a personal visit to their offices in Croydon, everything could be sorted, and Krissy could have her existing spouse visa extended. However, when we arrived, we discovered that they were working from temporary facilities, they only had room for actual applicants, and there was already a long line of folks waiting. Small children, and long lines don't mix. Anyway, when Krissy is finally seen, she's told that her application will be refused because she doesn't have the required paperwork. We went back for another go at explaining our case, but with no luck. This is where the stress really came in – Krissy's visa was due to expire in a few days. If that happened, she would not be able to re-enter the country, even as a tourist! We were short on options. The next day, I phoned the Home Office again, and had another go at explaining the situation. I was told that we'd been given bad information, and that if we came down, all could be sorted out. Unfortunately, I didn't have the foresight to get the name of the person who'd told us this, and sure enough when we were finally interviewed, we were told that nothing could be done.

Back in Eindhoven, we call the British consulate in Amsterdam, who told us to come pay a visit. The folks there took one look at the situation and said my wife could have a new spouse visa on the spot, as long as we paid the appropriate fee. Amazing...

As Christmas 2000 drew near, it became clear that my current contract was unlikely to be renewed. I'd pretty much decided to throw in the towel anyway, as the environment was becoming increasingly difficult to work in. My predecessor had walked out of the job due to conflict with unreasonable management, and I was having similar problems.

Belgian Waffle

The hunt for a new job was a lot less strenuous this time around, and I managed to obtain offers in both Luxembourg and Belgium. We paid a brief visit to

both, and eventually decided on the latter, mostly because it would be easier to move to.

I spent the month of January commuting to Antwerp, which is about 45 minutes drive from Eindhoven. Finding unfurnished rental accommodation there wasn't a problem, but if you wanted something to sit on, the choice was a lot more limited. Eventually we decided on a good, if expensive, apartment overlooking the central park, and moved into it at the beginning of February. Being unfurnished, the first thing we had to do was go shopping – nothing too extravagant, but I'm pretty sure we were the best customers Ikea saw that day. The electrical store across the road did pretty well out of us too. Having got set up, Krissy and the kids embarked on a visit home to Oz, whilst I embarked upon the nightmare of Belgian bureaucracy which is necessary in order to become self employed, and buy a car. I was to take a couple of weeks out in Oz later on, and we'd all come back together.

Buying the car was an experience to say the least. Unlike Australia where a car sits on the lot, you buy it, and you drive it away, the process in Belgium is a whole lot more convoluted, especially if you don't already have one. Whereas in Australia the plate stays with the car, in Belgium, the plate stays with you – cars on lots are not registered, and you have to bring your plate with you in order to drive it away. So, you get your plate from the licensing authority, and take it to the dealer. The dealer then takes the car to the police for a road worthiness test, and when that's done, you can collect your new toy. My case was compounded further because I only had a temporary ID, and the local office were telling me I could only have a transit plate (as issued for cars being exported). I had to go to the central office in Brussels to get it cleared up.

Whilst in The Netherlands, we'd relied on public transport, so having a car opened up a whole new vista of possibility, and our weekends were again spent travelling. From Antwerp, you can get to a lot of places; five different countries are within 4 hours travel time, and many more are less than a day away. In addition to various Belgian towns, and more Dutch towns, we were visiting England more often, and also found time to see some of Germany (including the Christmas market at Cologne), Luxembourg again, and even a marathon drive to Denmark on one occasion. The kids were starting to appreciate the trips, and we took them to a local theme park a couple of times, and tried to find other activities specifically with them in mind.

Changing Plans

Around the middle of 2001, we made the decision to buy a place in England. At that point, it was looking a lot like we'd be staying in Europe longer than originally

planned, and we really wanted a base which we could fall back on when necessary. It would likely also help when Krissy's visa came up for renewal again. In July we made an offer on a place in the North West of England, and it was subsequently accepted, causing the wheels of the home buying industry to fly into motion. *Fly* is not really accurate, and we didn't complete the purchase until December of the same year.

Of course, in November, we faced the visa issue again. Once more, a trip to the Home Office in Croydon was required, but this time we thought everything should be in order. No such luck – even though we had all the required papers, it was deemed that not enough time had been spent in England to qualify. At least this time, they gave Krissy a further 6 month extension without quibbling.

By then, Christmas was almost upon us. Krissy's mother was paying us another visit, and we'd originally planned to spend the holiday season in our new house. Unfortunately, it had taken so long to buy it, that it just wasn't ready for us to live in at that point. Oh well, Christmas in Antwerp is nothing to complain about.

Into the New Year, and we were making plans for relocation to England. Krissy was spending the odd weekend in England organising work on the house - some decoration was in order, and it was logical to do it before shipping our stuff over. She was also working on school for the kids, as well as researching the possibility of opening a shop in the local area. Most of our travelling was confined to the UK at that point, so that we could sort out the house, and finally get her visa sorted.

Once again, things did not go smoothly at the Home Office. We turned up in the early morning of the first day, and then waited all day only to be told that no more applications were being processed that day. We returned the following day, and stood in a cold and wet line for well over an hour before we got into the building. Again, we waited until around 12.30, at which point we were only a couple of numbers from being called when the fire alarm went off, and the building was evacuated. It was well over two hours before we got back in, and when we did, we were at the back of the queue again!! When we finally got to the desk, we were told that the application would not be processed on the spot (the whole reason we'd gone to the building in the first place), as it was too late. To say we were unimpressed would be an understatement, and after patiently relaying our entire history with the Home Office, and doing a bit of shouting, somebody finally took pity on us, and processed the application. Krissy finally had a British residents visa.

Anyway, with the visa sorted, and the bulk of the decoration work done, we booked the movers for the 26th June.

The Unexpected

Then, on the 19th of June, without warning, and for no reason, Krissy died!

The death of a loved one is a terrible experience at the best of times. For us, we had no close friends locally, and the nearest family were in another country. Add in the obligatory homicide investigation by the police (with me as the only possible suspect), and the fact that we had been due to move in 7 days time, and you will understand when I say I felt the world had caved in.

I was suddenly faced with a whole raft of challenges that had hitherto never crossed my mind. One of the biggest headaches was with Krissy's estate; under Belgian law, if there is no will, the children are the default benefactors. How that works with joint assets I have no idea, but I was able to argue that Krissy was UK resident, so her estate was subject to British law, and not Belgian. I then made the mistake of mentioning it to our bank, which promptly froze our account; something that is standard practice in Belgium.

Anyway, I continued with our departure from the apartment, and encountered a further headache, which was caused by the way Belgian rental law works. When we took the apartment, we'd agreed a lease of 12 months. As that time approached, my employment was looking rather uncertain, so we made a further agreement to continue in the apartment on a month by month basis, with a requirement of a minimum one month notice to leave. Papers were drawn up, and sent to the owner who subsequently failed to sign them. Thus, when I gave the agreed notice, the owner demanded 'damages' for breaking our lease early. It turned out that by staying in the apartment without a written agreement, we had effectively taken a default 9 year lease on the place, and that the owner was entitled to 1 months rent for every year less than 3 that we stayed. I felt that we'd been ripped off, and had circumstances been different, I'd have happily let the owner take me to court, but it was just one more problem that I didn't need at that point, so I wrote off our deposit. Naturally, while all this was going on, I wasn't working, so there was no money coming in either.

It didn't take long to decide to continue working in Antwerp, but that meant I had to find a new apartment, and also something to do with the children. This is where the Belgian social services shine. They helped me find a special, state sponsored day care aimed directly at people in my situation, and also pointed me in the right direction for schools (children as young as 2 ½ can go to pre-primary in Belgium). The schools provide for kiddie care both before and after regular hours, and for a nominal fee, so I was able to carry on with full time work. We got a new apartment, and settled into a routine involving regular trips to England, and occasional weekends elsewhere.

That's pretty much how it continued until March of 2003, when my contract finally ran out, and I found myself looking for more work.

That's All She Wrote

And that's still the situation as I write this now. I can't be as flexible as before, because I have to cater for the children whatever I do, and it seems very likely that we will return home to Australia.

As I look back over the events of the past 4 years, I imagine people asking if it's worth it, or if I'd do it all again, and to be honest, I'm not sure. Despite the inordinate number of problems we managed to face, there have been a lot of good times too. I have learned a lot about other countries and cultures, and we've done plenty of sight seeing. The children have picked up a second language, although it remains to be seen if it will stick with them or not.

I know that as a single parent, it's extremely unlikely I'd do the expat thing again. Even with a partner, I'd probably avoid it if kids were involved. But for single people, or couples, I say go for it; the experience is well worth the challenges.



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