

# CULTURAL TRANSPLANT

**Meredith Fogg**

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**My Expat Story:** It is a common story probably. The one with the trip that started as a working holiday to see the world. The year abroad that turns into several, or in some cases a lifetime.

I met H in Bali in 1981 and we kept in touch for three years. I decided at that time in my life that if I were to go on the big trip OS, I had to do it pretty soon, as I found myself wanting to just 'settle down' in Balmain, Sydney, my home at the time and a lovely little village in the middle of an exciting city. In 1983 I ventured forth to Europe via the USA. Upon meeting H again, a real romance developed, so before I had any time to reflect, we were involved. Continuing on my trip through Europe and landing in London I found a job, but returned to the states as the days began to shorten and the weather turned cool for a Queensland girl.

I stayed in the USA for six months and when H was offered a year's contract to teach in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, he invited me to join him. The option he was offered was to go there as a single guy or as a married couple, so he asked me to marry him. We married and off we went for an adventurous year in S.E. Asia. After that year, upon returning to the US, the reality set in. Living in Denver, Colorado is a long way from the ocean and it is even further from family in Australia. I started settling into life there, got a job and tried to make some friends.

I met some Australians and some of the ladies had created a lunch group. This proved to be like an oasis in the desert, where I could meet with other Aussie women who were living through similar experiences of learning to adapt to a different culture and lifestyle. I found myself living the sometimes fringe dweller existence of the expat. The Aussie group also got together to celebrate Australian holidays and the occasional picnic and or cricket match. These occasions proved to be invaluable in the first years of living as an expat. It helped make the transition to living in a foreign land more feasible and less rocky.

Some would ask 'Why not make friends with the locals?', but the truth is that I tried, but often the click just didn't happen. I made one genuine American girl friend in my first year in Denver. Tourists or visitors who come to the US for a brief stay probably don't pick up on differences that affect communication on the long term. Subtle differences set up roadblocks that prevent a smooth course. Australian and North American cultural values might be similar in lots of ways but there are also many differences.

I gave birth to my first daughter in 1987. Nothing compares to cherishing a little bundle. My second daughter was born in 1990. She also was cherished as a treasure. Having children so far from home was emotionally difficult and certainly not practical. This of course is not only the expat experience, for anyone raising a family away from their roots has a similar difficulty. It is not practical to have no extended family to help raise children. My children have grown up knowing their Grandparents from the aspect of the long distance relationship, which has obvious limitations. My parents have not been able to have an influence on my children in a significant way.

Although my children are Australian citizens by descent, they are mostly influenced by American culture. This makes them about 90% American and only 10% Australian - if that. They have a great appreciation for Australia and love it best of any country they have visited outside America. They have a passion for the beach and lifestyle of Australia and appreciate the Aussie sense of humour. Yet it is hard for them to contemplate a permanent move to Australia. Their roots are in Colorado where they were raised. They love to visit Australia and consider going to Uni there, but how practical can that idea be? Only the future will tell. For their mum it is a big dream and for the kids, an interesting contemplation.

On the surface the USA looks quite similar to Australia. Both countries share a common language and many of the same values. It is only after you reside in a place for an extended stay that you uncover the essence of the difference. I have now had about 17 years to examine these contrasts at close range. There are some very basic things that are not the same. One is the sense of humour. Australians tend to find some things extremely funny that are not considered worthy of a good laugh in the mind of an American. One example came to light when watching the movie 'The Castle' with Aussies and Americans. The Aussies laughed endlessly throughout the whole movie, but there was very little mirth bursting forth from the Americans. I have also had a similar experience when I have been at a movie in America watching a British comedy with nobody laughing but me. Australians tend to have a depreciating sense of humour where Americans are more proud and less likely to laugh at themselves. I find it astonishing to experience two cultures that appear to be so alike, yet appreciate humour so differently. I find that the Australian character usually can laugh at American humour while the opposite is not true.

Of course the main trouble with living overseas for an extended period of time is that you loose touch with the culture that you originally identified with. In my case this has happened to some degree. I have returned to Australia regularly for visits every year or two when possible. I have kept in touch with family and friends as closely as possible within the confines of the long distance relationship. I tend to

gravitate to Australian books and movies and read The Sydney Morning Herald via the Internet to try to keep informed of happenings downunder. But in the end unless you are surrounded by the culture that shaped your values, you are not absorbing new or current influences. On the trips home you may absorb some aspect, but the influence in such a small dose does not contribute heartily to keeping you as a true dinky-di Aussie. The cultural influence upon the expat Australian tends then toward a static effect, where it remains undeveloped and becomes more influenced by nostalgia. This nostalgia tends towards the romantic, because what you no longer have, and which was once dear is only seen through rose coloured glasses.

Keeping abreast of the social and political life downunder is also very difficult when living and working overseas. You would have to be very dedicated and single minded to read everything and associate with other Australians regularly to discuss political viewpoints and make it your mission while overseas to stay informed. Most expats I know over here find that this is virtually impossible as the life you lead in the foreign land is the one that you're mostly influenced by. The home country is just not having the same impact on your point of view. Unless the expat becomes a citizen of the land of residence he/she cannot vote in elections and partake of a significant right of the citizen. This leaves you in a kind of political limbo, with no finger in any pie.

Recently the Australian government has allowed its citizens to have dual citizenship with the USA. This means after all these years I will be able to now take on the role of the American and vote while residing here. I intend to do this so I can participate in elections and have a say where I actually live. Yet I am reluctant to become a US citizen, more for emotional reasons of my attachment to Australia and being an Aussie than for practical reasons.

The expat becomes somewhat of a hybrid. Over time, influenced by the culture of exposure the expat must absorb more of the present and less of the past. It becomes a double-edged sword. If... you absorb the new culture, you have to abandon the old to some extent. The longer you live as if the old culture is alive and thriving, the more you deny the present and reality. A part of you has to be abandoned, you have to become less Australian to survive in the new environment. So the result is not an American and not an Australian, but something of a mix. In my case I have resisted becoming American and more strongly identify with being Australian. Yet is this true and is it real? This is the conflict of the expat who to survive must become some odd hybrid.

Of course my dream is to return to Australia to reside there permanently. Enough of this extended overseas expatriate existence. Although my husband and I have researched ways to make this dream a reality, nothing has surfaced to make it happen yet. One day I hope to make this dream come true.



**Meredith Fogg** grew up in Brisbane. She pursued a career in Fashion Design and had a passion for travel. She thought she should see some of the world before she came home to Australia to settle down. Now, she's still waiting to come home.

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