

PERspective

PROS AND CONS OF EXPAT LIFE –
EXPERIENCES FROM 25 YEARS AND 84
COUNTRIES

By Per Ostberg

A sample section

KNOW WHEN TO LEAVE

Of all the stratagems, to know when to quit is the best. – Chinese
Proverb

When working in Africa, I pulled long hours. While friends and colleagues socialised, I sat in the office until midnight. Once the work slowed down, my bosses would move me to another country and project. While I enjoyed the work, I realised it was not fitting into my life plans.

I have seen many foreigners sitting in their bars, lodges, farmhouses in southern France, or driving an overland truck across continents wearing that look of “Hmmm, it didn’t turn out the way I planned”.

Places change. We change. Travel is all about timing.

“Get your skinny arse over here!” George Aylmer’s broad American twang made me smile.

“Hi George, nice to hear from you too,” I said. “How’s Egypt?”

“It’s full of fucking sand! Per, I need your help here. The logistics is in a mess not even you could create!”

“I’m in Indonesia for another couple of months,” I replied.

“Yeah, but Indonesia’s finances have gone tits up. Make a plan.”

George was right. The currency had lost 80-90% of its value. No one could afford telecoms equipment. We all had started looking for new jobs in other markets. Some had already left. I was in limbo. George’s call was welcome.

Some phone calls to head office and a few weeks later, I was in a taxi heading for Cairo. Coming from lush and tropical Jakarta, Egypt felt dry, dusty, bleak, and sandy. Only the minarets calling Muslims to prayers felt familiar – Indonesia having the world’s largest Muslim population. Seven months later, I would decline a 20% salary increase and an amazing bonus scheme.

Egypt for me was hard. I’m an early bird, in the office around 7 am. I like to knock off when the day’s tasks are done, meet friends for a beer or dinner and then be in bed well before midnight. This does not work in the Egyptian culture where you sleep after work before meeting friends for a drink at 10 pm, and eating dinner around midnight. By the time my Egyptian friends were meeting up, I was already in bed. The project was hectic. We worked around the clock seven days a week to get the network up in time, but I enjoyed it. I worked in Egypt and lived my dream!

One evening George and I sat on my 23rd floor balcony in Zamalek, Cairo, overlooking the Nile. Feet propped up on the railing we watched the sun disappear behind the pyramids of Giza – a million dollar view. I had chased my dream so hard and achieved my

goal, but was working around the world really worth the sacrifices? Two thoughts vied for my attention: ‘What now?’ and ‘Where to from here?’ I felt lost and couldn’t ignore the sinking feeling in my stomach.

I sipped a pensive whiskey. The ice clinked in the glass over the evening sounds of people, donkeys and cars.

“What’s up?” asked George.

“I don’t want to be doing this anymore,”

I could see confusion in George’s face. “I forgive you for dragging me to this sandy car-infested city from Indonesia,” I said only half joking, “but I’ve achieved my goal. I’ve worked around the world. And now I really, really, need to do something new.”

George tried to point out I hadn’t been to America, nor had I seen the rest of Africa. It didn’t help. The sinking feeling was still there.

This would not be the last time I would decide to “quit while ahead” as the old saying goes.

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