

Expatriate Housing: Advice for a Smoother Transition

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Research conducted by the Interchange Institute, *At Home Abroad: A Study of Expatriates' Housing and Its Ties to Assignment Success*, compiled advice on housing for new international assignees. The advice offered by survey participants – assignees themselves – fell into a number of categories, presented below in decreasing frequency of mention.

Don't Rush

The most common overall advice was very practical – “before making your final choice, visit the location, take your time, and make sure you see the big picture.” Participants also recommended that new expatriate families:

- Look at what is available. Do not settle; you have to live there sometimes by yourself, in a way, because many spouses work long hours. Make sure it's the house you want and will be happy in.
- Get local market information up front.
- Never move under pressure. Take your time to find the right home ... even if it requires a financial investment on your part.
- Rent first and try to get invited to other people's houses so you can compare.
- Visit the house at different moments: morning, afternoon, rush hour, and night. Watch for traffic, noise, how lively (or not) the neighborhood is, and whether you feel safe.
- Know what is important in a house for you, and where you want to compromise. Spending months in a hotel or temporary apartment (especially with kids) is not fun. So balance your demands with what is feasible in the location, your budget, and so on.
- Don't “go native;” it usually backfires, you look phony to the natives, and it will wear you out trying to do something very difficult on top of adapting to a new culture.
- Take your time choosing furniture and decorations; let the house grow organically.
- Figure out the five most important things you need (space, parking, how many rooms, how much light, proximity to work, grocery store, schools). Then try to find something as close as you can that meets those needs. (See sidebar on page 8, “Other Practical Ideas.”)

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Make It Yours

The next most commonly offered advice was to “personalize the home and make it yours by using cherished and personal items.” In other words:

- Bring some familiar items you really like to help ease the transition. Prioritize nesting/settling in since your home (living space) will be the anchor and refuge for your situation, whether in a developed, developing, or un(der)developed country.
- Decorate and use ornaments, photographs, familiar furniture, artwork – whatever – to make the place a home away

Other Practical Ideas When Choosing A New Home

- Consider how the layout and arrangement of furniture and appliances will influence family interaction. The most satisfied expatriate families lived in homes that promoted more and easier communication within the family.
- Consider one’s favorite home. Try to match a new home on size of common living space and kitchen, space for children’s play, decor and design, layout, available space for interests, amount and type of light, comfort, and level of luxuriousness. Participants whose favorite homes were the ones they had most recently left, and perhaps felt “torn away from,” were particularly sensitive to aspects of their current homes. They had better mental health, rated the assignment more positively and felt more settled if they were more satisfied with their homes and saw them as like those favorite homes.

from home. You can always add local pieces ... and may even change entirely over to them once you feel fully settled. Do what suits you.

- Bring small, most cherished possessions, but don’t ship furniture.
- Your house... needs to be your “home” rather than just a dwelling place; it acts as your “island,” where you can be insulated from the stresses of work and cultural differences.

Location, Location, Location

As most people shopping for a place to live know the importance of neighborhoods, the next piece of advice was to “pay careful attention to the location of your home.” But this aspect has a number of considerations:

- It depends on whether it’s for a year or forever! For a year, just pick a place convenient for work and social life. If it’s forever, you need to think of much wider issues – neighbors, room for expansion, parking, proximity to a school bus stop or school.
- Decide what kind of commute you can handle.
- If you have kids, be near other kids or they will be miserable ... and you, too.
- Get a place near the center of town so that you can easily get around and don’t feel isolated.
- It’s great to have a lovely house, but if it’s not accessible to the facilities that suit your life style, the dream home can become a weight around your neck.

Don’t Pre-Judge

Next, several participants advised assignees to “be flexible, and don’t expect your new home to be exactly like the last one you had.” This perspective goes hand-in-hand with the nature of successful expatriates:

- Be open to the new culture and surroundings.
- Make local friends.
- Take your time to get to know the neighborhood and community.
- You have to compromise, so get your priorities straight ... and good luck!
- Expect the unexpected. (We had fire-ant invasions and bats, two apartments with insufficient power to run our appliances, and iffy hot water.)
- Be positive; negativity will grow old very fast if you let it.
- Expect to deviate from your original plan (a number of times!).

Above All, the Family

It goes without saying that when the family is happy, the expatriate can be more productive. The advice was to “make your family’s happiness a priority.” It means prioritizing children’s needs over other things. Let the accompanying spouse have the ultimate say on which house to rent/buy; in almost all cases, the spouse is the one living there and decorating it. Think carefully about your reasons for living in another country, as well as what in your living situation will really make the possibilities happen in the new country.

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The Meaning of “Home”

While a number of respondents offered their thoughts on what a “home” is within the context of living as an expatriate, one particular participant summed up the issue very well:

“Central to our identity as expats is the process of burrowing into foreign cultures and expanding our ideas of what ‘home’ really means. Home is by nature a movable feast. There is, of course, the physical home that becomes instantly familiar the moment we hang our pictures — this is always the moment that makes my house my home. But with each overseas assignment, ‘home’ becomes less of an

architectural construct and more of an internal feeling, a haven where we know we will find familiar warmth in each other. This is especially important when uprooting children, forcing them to undergo all the traditional burdens of moving with the additions of unfamiliar language, food and culture. Home, I told my little ones, is where Mommy and Daddy live. We still live by those words. The house changes, the neighborhood changes, the friends change, the school changes, the language changes, the culture changes, but the love stays the same.”

And remember, a home is a critically important but subtle window to one’s host culture. A culturally-typical home can offer access to a deeper cultural experience.

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For more information, visit:
www.interchangeinstitute.org/files/At_Home_Abroad_final.pdf

