

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOING ON?



CBIE • BCEI
Canadian Bureau for International Education
Bureau canadien de l'éducation internationale

So – You want to go abroad...



Text by Alan Cumyn

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I SO — YOU WANT TO GO ABROAD...

The feeling has been with you for awhile. Perhaps now, for whatever reasons, the time is right. You are young and not ready, yet, for a long-term career; or you are retiring soon and looking forward to something very different; or you have simply been doing the same things for too long, and are ready to a change, a new challenge. Perhaps your course demands it or you want to follow a specialized course of study; or you just want to get away for a summer and pick up a language, or some credits, or a lot of new experiences.

Maybe your friends have gone. They are writing you letters with exotic postage stamps on them. Their handwriting has become very small. The words are jammed nearly on top of one another, squished in together on thin paper. They are talking about sunsets as if such things did not happen every day. Someone has spent five pages describing a marketplace, a mountain, a museum. They are telling you it is time to go abroad.

But perhaps a vacation is not what you want. Maybe you don't have the funds. Maybe you are not interested in suitcases, knapsacks, hotels, hostels, twenty countries in nineteen days with complimentary continental breakfasts five mornings out of seven. You don't want to feel like a flat rock spinning through the air, skipping from one place to another before you finally sink with exhaustion.

You want to *live* abroad. To work or study. To get to know people. Immerse yourself in a foreign culture. Rub shoulders with the locals. Speak their language, learn their ways, see the world through different eyes. Stay awhile. And have the kind of experience that will not only challenge you, but will run through the rest of your life.

*I couldn't speak the language. I was miserable for the first four months. Everything was bizarre. The food was terrible. I got sick... it was
WONDERFUL!*

WHY GO?

Everyone has his or her own mix of reasons for wanting to go abroad. There is the lure of travel — excitement, adventure, risk. The desire to “broaden your horizons”, to grow as a person. When you “see the world”, you get a better idea of just where in the world you fit. You might build your confidence, develop more maturity, come back older and wiser. You will probably be much more culturally sensitive than before, having been part of a minority group for a time, and having reacted intellectually, emotionally, physically, spiritually to another culture.

When you *live* abroad, working or studying, as opposed to simply travelling, you have a much greater chance to immerse yourself in the culture of the home country. You have the time to settle in, to get used to the smells and the street scenes, the language, religion, everyday personalities of the people. Your stomach has time to get used to the food, and that food — and culture, and system, and place — starts to make up part of you, too. When you are getting to know individuals, when you are breathing their air and drinking their wine and, literally, walking in their shoes, you have more of a chance to see things through their eyes. And you cannot help but be changed by this sort of experience.

I share the house with an 18-year-old Canadian volunteer from the N.W.T., the project nurse and an agriculturalist. People wander in and out at will and will just sit and watch or not watch, speak or not speak. There are always a dozen or so kids doing the same, usually confining themselves to one corner and maybe goofing around a bit. Once we locked the door for a bit of privacy but they came in the window and let the others in. Sometimes they pilfer food if we're not around. We cooked up a lot once and when we came back to eat, it was gone. The locals just laugh and laugh, saying it seems to have evaporated. We hardly get mad any more — I guess we're just getting used to it. It's just a different way of looking at things.

One traditional reason for going abroad is the desire to make a big difference, to “change the world.”

But — the world of overseas work, especially of development work in the Third World, is itself changing. The days of the Great White Man bringing Wisdom to the primitive natives are ending. So, too, it seems, are ending the days of young graduates, with no particularly relevant training or experience, sent abroad to somehow help the locals with their agricultural projects, their water problems, their forestry needs.

Many organizations are finding these days that it is important to send over *qualified, experienced people*, if you are going to send anyone at all. And they should be working on projects that are not only of practical use, but can be taken over by nationals somewhere along the line, preferably sooner rather than later.

They also feel that while it is important that the people they send believe in what they are doing, their idealism should be tempered with realistic sense of just what can be accomplished given the time and resources available, the cultural differences that exist, and the difficulty of the problem in the first place. Often it is not reasonable to expect that your efforts will make much of a difference in the short run. This is not a reason to not go, but it is important to keep in mind.

Much of the “change”, “growth”, and “development”, then, that will happen because of your overseas stint, will be personal — that is, will happen within you. This makes sense because you are one person, and “they” are many. The change that you effect on them is not likely to be great; the change that they effect on you just might be, especially if you are at all receptive or open to it.

THINGS TO BE GAINED...

Let’s look first at overseas jobs. Why go to work abroad? Is the money good? Sometimes. But generally speaking, if you want to make a lot of money, the chances are much better at home than they are abroad.

Yes, we have unemployment here and there is lots of competition, but the situation in other countries is similar if not worse. Also, as a foreigner, you would usually need a work permit, and most countries, Canada included, will protect their own workers before hiring from abroad.

What you would gain, if not a great deal of money, is job experience. But you’d get that from any job, right? Yes, but often people who work abroad, because of their special status, end up handling more responsibility than they would ever have at home. A middle-level Canadian education executive, for example, with some prior international experience, decided to take a job in a small developing country... and ended up helping to plan, develop and implement the whole education system. He was involved in the highest level of decision making, and the challenge of the four years he spent overseas was far greater than anything he would have been able to get at home.

Of course there can be big problems if a person takes on far more than he or she can handle. The inexperience and ignorance of generations of “experts” have done a lot of harm in many different projects around the world. At the same time, in Canada, the realities of demographics can make it difficult for young people with talent to be given the kind of chance they are ready for and need. If you are not given the challenge, you won’t get the experience; but if you don’t have the experience, you won’t be entrusted with the challenge. Sometimes going abroad to work can be a way out of this particular Catch-22; but you have to be careful that what you are taking on is appropriate, and that the work that you do will be useful.

A lot of the “experience” you will gain might have little to do with your actual work, but will nonetheless be valued by many employers who recognize the added maturity, diplomacy, cultural sensitivity and language skills that have been gained by the overseas worker or student. As companies and organizations have more and more international dealings, it’s becoming evident that a knowledge of English and of North American ways of doing things is not always enough. Contracts can be lost, communications damaged, feelings hurt by ignorance bred in cultural isolation. And taking a one-week tour is not the same as actually *living* in a country for a length of time.

The last time I was in town there were three serious injuries in the space of two days. It was a coincidence that I was there and had the keys to the clinic, so using my “I know first aid, can I help?” training, I did what I could to patch them up. What kind of development agency sets up a clinic in a town with no other medical services and then lets medicines expire, supplies run out and people bleed because we’re not in town that week and in eight years haven’t gotten around to training anyone local in basic first aid?

So I hope to take over the clinic in a first aid capacity although any doctoring beyond headaches and runny noses is unfortunately beyond me. With any luck the people will be interested in a forestry program and I hope to be able to start up an experimental garden as well. The people really need to get organized more than anything. I mean it really doesn't make a whole lot of sense to send a Canadian 'expert' here to teach a farmer how to plant!

You can get that experience from *studying* abroad too. Want to learn another language? Foreign language teachers have known for a long time that by far the best way is to immerse yourself in the culture where that language is spoken, so that you *have* to use it on a daily basis. Want to study the history/geography/politics/sociology/anthropology/you-name-it of another country? Why not get it from the source? Your local university's library is only going to take you so far, and will probably be a poor substitute for actually going to and experiencing the country first hand.

There are of course many other reasons for studying abroad. Perhaps the academic institutions, in a given field, will be of higher quality than you can find at home. Or perhaps home employers will *perceive* them to be of higher quality. Or perhaps the time is right for you to soak yourself in another culture so that your learning experience goes far beyond what you would pick up at home. As a foreign student, too, you would have to develop and practice certain diplomatic skills. Like it or not, you are a representative — of your home school, of your country — and often will get special treatment. Perhaps you will be asked to dine with the college president, or make a speech about Canadian culture, or attend embassy functions. A great deal might be expected of you, and thus your opportunities to learn, and conversely, to make bad impressions, will be increased. The risk and the responsibilities are undoubtedly greater. So too are the opportunities for real growth.

WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

We came down a few days early on a friendly word of advice and missed an ambush along the road that claimed the lives of nine more soldiers. It is the stupidest war when you see it reduced to just ordinary people killing each other off. The soldiers are almost all under 25 and from just as poor backgrounds as the guerrillas. When they come by to talk to us they are shy, awkward and very polite. Just kids. The battalion moved out of our town and the people burnt the camp behind them. They may be back later but in the meantime the other guys wander freely around. It is not possible to stay out of things and although situations may appear compromising I don't think we are in any immediate danger (at least I hope we aren't!).

Not everyone has a good experience abroad. In fact, the traps, pitfalls, problems, and potential disasters can be enormous.

What are some of the problems you might encounter? Illness, fatigue, culture shock, boredom, disillusionment, violence, mental stress, weight loss, weight gain, loneliness, frustration, alienation, alcoholism, misunderstandings, tax complications, marital stress, accidents, money problems... Whatever sorts of things can go wrong in the course of normal living have the chance of being intensified in the added stress abroad.

Horror stories abound, and you don't have to go far to find them. Spend some time with a group of people who have lived abroad, *anywhere*, and the stories will come out; some of them, in fact, will seem hilarious, now that people are *out* of that particular situation. What is important to remember is that going abroad to live is a serious undertaking. It requires a great deal of thought, preparation, hard work, patience, flexibility, stamina, open-mindedness, and good humour. The potential benefits are great, but so too are the risks, and you should do everything you can, before you go, to find out what you are getting yourself into.



II

ASSESSING YOUR SUITABILITY FOR OVERSEAS WORK OR STUDY

I was on my way to my first posting, as a teacher, to a small country in Africa. I'd been travelling with a Canadian couple who had also come to work. However the wife became very depressed as soon as we reached our destination, and after only a few days it was beginning to look serious: she was refusing to go out, was keeping the curtains drawn, wasn't talking to very many people. Hoping to be able to help, I asked her if there was anything I could do.

"I will never get used to this place," the wife said.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Everybody's black," was the reply.

Prejudice, of course, is a slippery thing, easy to spot in others, almost impossible to see in ourselves. But if we shift our focus to include *preconceptions* concerning not just race but culture, lifestyles, everyday ways of being, then it becomes easy to see that we are all susceptible to taking for granted "our" way of doing things, without entirely realizing the other ways practiced in other countries.

But preconceptions are just one aspect of the larger issue, which is *flexibility*. How adaptable are you to new conditions, foods, ways of thinking? How rigid are you in your expectations of yourself and other people? Do you tend to set goals and stick by them until you've succeeded, regardless of what comes up?

The people who do well in overseas assignments seem to be those who are able to adapt to the conditions they find, and work within the system that is already there. That includes getting out and meeting people, learning the language, investigating the culture, staying healthy, keeping a strong sense of self, and being accepted by the local people. What sorts of qualities are needed? Here is a short list¹:

- tolerance for differences and ambiguity
- open-mindedness
- patience
- flexibility/adaptability

¹Source: L. Robert Kohls, *Survival Kit For Overseas Living*, Intercultural Press, 1984.

- nonjudgmental attitude
- curiosity
- warmth in human relationships
- energy/good health
- motivation
- self-reliance, strong sense of self
- perceptiveness
- sensitivity
- low goal/task orientation
- sense of humour
- empathy
- ability to fail

Which are the most important skills? Many veterans of overseas postings would list **sense of humour** at the top. You are plunging yourself into a new environment, a different culture, among strange people. In many ways it's like becoming a child again, in that you are putting aside the experience, knowledge, maturity (and hence power) you have built up at home, to start again in a foreign place. The ability to laugh at absurdities, incongruities, and even your own shortcomings, can go a long way to helping you accept and adapt to different ways.

Warmth in human relationships is also important. People who are outgoing, who reach more than half-way to meet others and make friends, are often better able to overcome the cultural boundaries that separate foreigners and nationals. Those who are reserved, who stick close to their Canadian groupings, can be much slower to participate, and hence have greater problems coping with cultural differences.

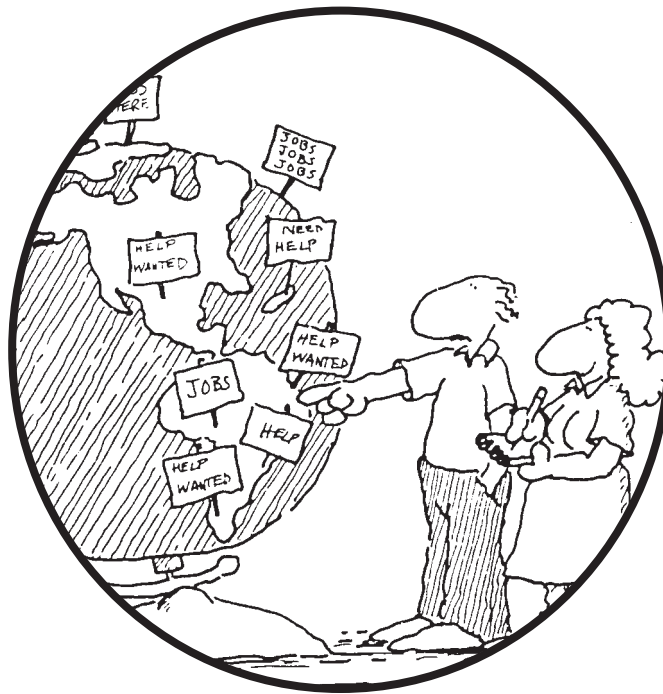
The disastrous extreme, of course, is to be *too outgoing*, friendly to the point of pushiness. Some cultures are reserved compared to ours, and someone trying too hard to win friends too soon can lose respect. The key is to practice appropriate behaviour for the situation, which means being observant of and sensitive to cultural norms and expectations, especially when you have first arrived, and have a lot of learning to do!

Another important group of traits, which might require a little explanation, concerns the **ability to fail**, and **low goal/task orientation**. Failure, to some extent or other, seems to be built into the overseas experience, especially if we are looking for short-term results, a North American specialty. Compared to many other cultures, we are in a big hurry to get things done. We want results NOW. But, what seems like a reasonable timetable in Winnipeg might in fact be ludicrous given the realities of a situation overseas, and unless those realities — the conditions and the culture — are taken into account, the results we achieve might be no more than a lot of bitter feelings. The ability to fail, then, might simply entail not getting angry in a given situation, not losing one's temper under mounting complications, frustrations, and communications mix-ups. Easy to say, not always so easy to do...

I once went to a small school in the highlands at the request of the Minister of Higher Education who was a local politician from the neighborhood who made good in the capital (for awhile). Campaigning among his own, he

promised the usual patronage and trickledowns of his newfound power. I, a foreign teacher, was a concrete embodiment of the Big Man's pull. The only problem was that he had not informed the Bureaucracy of my impending arrival. The result: 8 months of begging loans from the school headmaster and humiliating trips to bow and scrape before disgruntled civil servants, and finally, when things were getting desperate, I made it on the payroll just in time to blast off and away from a situation with which I, the impatient youngster (just graduated with a B.A.) was fed up. As bad as this situation was on the face of it, patience would have been the definitive cure after all. The school soon started building its long-awaited dorms, the curriculum improved, the football team flourished, the barefoot cross-country team maintained its dominance over the lowlanders, better qualified students appeared on registration week, and the Minister himself lost the next elections. But I was long, long gone, busy experiencing bitter reverse culture shock back home.

Clearly then, it takes a special kind of effort, and a special person to be suitable for a work or study term abroad. It's dangerous, however, to generalize, because so much depends on where you are going, what you are doing, and what happens along the way... It's all so unpredictable, and many different types of people do well abroad. Perhaps the most important thing is your own attitude: if you really *want* to go, and are willing to prepare, then a lot of other things should fall into place.



III

WHAT'S OUT THERE, ANYWAY?

Well, I did get a job, working for the Wheat Board as a lab assistant in the entomology section. Basically I'm a Bio assayer which means that I count bugs — dead bugs, live bugs, and some sick ones too, a whole bunch of different species. Basically we introduce the bugs to some wheat that's been treated with pesticides then wait for a bit, and count how many are dead or alive. Great stuff. Some days I count over 5,000 of the little suckers. But the people are good and I have been able to go on field trips up country. I've seen quite a bit of the country and its grain silos...

You might be surprised at the range, variety, and number of work or study opportunities for Canadians abroad. As you scroll through the Directory, keep in mind that the information given here on any program or organization is just an *introduction* — that as you contact the ones you are interested in, you will find out much more information, and might even be referred to other programs and organizations that aren't represented here.

Which programs and organizations are appropriate for you will of course depend on who you are — your background, skills, experience, and, perhaps, how much money you have. Let's look at *study possibilities* first. You will find a wide range of possibilities for each level of education, including:

- high school exchanges
- programs for a year abroad at the undergraduate level
- programs for graduate study and post-doctoral research
- summer courses
- language schools
- vacation or study tours that combine travel and study for credit or pleasure.

Where possible, general programs have been included — that is, programs that are open to a wide range of study and research areas. A few of these programs are fully subsidized, including airfare, internal travel, a settling-in allowance, book subsidies, tuition, accommodation, thesis publishing grants, and a monthly stipend for the student *and his/her* family members. Most fall far short of that kind of support, and many require a substantial amount of money from the student.

If you have a lot of money, the possibilities for study abroad seem endless — there is no shortage of schools looking for international students who can pay their special rates. However, keep in mind that the quality of a study program is not necessarily reflected in its price. There is no substitute for researching a program well to find out exactly what you are getting.

Although studying abroad will usually be more expensive than studying at home, many overseas study programs are *not* overpriced, and can offer Canadian students a much broader educational experience than a local school could, if only because they take a student overseas. A year abroad can often be a highlight of one's academic education... and a lot of people who don't take the opportunity kick themselves later on when they realize what they probably missed.

Most colleges and universities have links with foreign institutions, so many students study abroad while earning credits for their degree at home. Many also, of course, enroll directly at foreign institutions. It is important, however, to keep in mind your aptitudes and abilities, especially if you are going to be studying in another language. It is one thing to be able to greet people on the street or read a menu; it is another to be able to follow lectures or read textbooks on complex subjects. Many programs now require a certificate from a language course before admission will be granted.

The *work possibilities* are also varied, ranging from volunteer manual labour to executive positions in international organizations. Where *you* fit in depends very much, again, on your background, experience, and interests. Some of the programs offer a great deal of support for their employees: orientations, language training, good salaries, benefit packages, full transportation costs, subsidized housing, recreation facilities, and so on. Some of them operate on a strictly volunteer basis, in which you pay your transportation and insurance costs, and perhaps even your housing and living expenses, while also donating your time and effort on a particular project. Most fall in between, with limited funding covering basic expenses, and the rest being made up by the employee.

GENERAL TRENDS

The general trends for work or study abroad are fairly clear. If you want to work abroad, there are many more opportunities in developing countries than in developed countries. If you want to study abroad, the reverse is generally true.

Why? Industrialized countries usually have their own large pools of qualified people, a fair percentage of whom are already unemployed and wondering if they should come to *Canada* to find work. These countries naturally prefer to hire from within before granting work visas to foreigners. They also have large numbers of established educational institutions which are attractive to foreign students, and which are interested in the revenues those students bring in.

In developing countries the need is great for experienced, qualified people, especially in certain practical areas, because these countries are facing problems of enormous magnitude: poverty, disease, over-population, pollution, famine, debt, the technology gap and, again, unemployment. There are, of course, many universities in these countries, but there isn't money enough to train adequate numbers of their own people, and so programs for foreign students are limited. It is true that many of these institutions would like to get the high fees brought in by foreign students, but it is also true that most students from developed countries would rather study at the Sorbonne, or Cambridge, or MIT, given the choice.

The entries in our Directory reflect these realities. You will find listed more opportunities for work in developing countries, and more study programs for the developed world. There are crossovers, of course, but they are exceptions to the general trends.

PROMISING FIELDS

Here are a few of the most promising fields for people who wish to *work* abroad:

Work requiring specific education and/or experience:

Teaching: Teaching remains one of the most “portable” professions, and the teaching of English or French as a Foreign Language can literally take you around the world. Both English and French have emerged as world languages and native speakers are in demand in many countries. Depending on where you go, you might be able to teach your language even with scanty academic or teaching qualifications; more so than before, however, certificates and degrees in the teaching of English or French as a Foreign Language are being required, along with perhaps other degrees and teaching experience.

There also remains a demand, especially in developing countries, for teachers of subjects related to technology, business, health care, science, computers, engineering, agriculture... almost anything practical which might help to aid the cause of development. As with language teachers, however, there has been a marked trend towards the hiring of people with more expertise, in the form of both education and experience, than in the past.

Health Care: A doctor, nurse or health professional trained in western medicine is in great demand the world over, especially in developing countries. Of course this is not news — we have a tremendous need for these people in our own north, and other isolated regions — nor do the reasons for this demand need to be gone over. Three categories of health professionals are currently in particular demand: nurses with community health and teaching skills emphasizing maternal and child health; nutritionists with community health experience; and general medical practitioners with obstetrical experience and basic surgical skills.

Development Aid: This field contains many different areas of expertise: agriculture, engineering, community development, small enterprise management, organization of cooperatives, trades and vocational training, construction, water management, forestry, carpentry, appropriate technology, plumbing, auto or diesel mechanics, road construction, electronics. The current emphasis is on small, community-oriented, self-help projects which will eventually be wholly run by nationals who have been trained to take over. The “expert” should have a great deal of practical experience in his or her field, but should also be a generalist, able to adapt to different situations, and have teaching, managerial, and organizational skills.

Work requiring moderate or little related education and/or experience:

There is no shortage of opportunities, for young people especially, to work abroad as “semi-skilled” or “unskilled” labour. The service industries need people on a regular basis as au pairs, hotel and restaurant workers, and tour guides. There are many agricultural exchanges for those with farm-related experience, and international workcamps for those who are interested in working on archeological digs, construction projects, and community development projects in general. And there are several working holiday plans which enable a young person to combine travel with incidental work in a foreign country — a great way to augment the income and get to know a place as well (but not recommended for those wishing to save money for school).

For the new graduate there are programs which enable you to serve an apprenticeship in your field in another country, thus giving you international and career-related experience at the same time.



IV

THE BEGINNING OF THE TOUGH PART: FINDING THAT WORK OR STUDY PROGRAM OVERSEAS

This is, as the title suggests, the beginning of the tough part. You are interested in working or studying overseas. You know that there are many possibilities. But how do you actually *find* the program that is for you? And then, how do you become part of it? How do you get that job or that scholarship which will take you overseas?

HOW LONG WILL THIS TAKE?

I had to go to the capital for my visa. The official process is both inefficient and time consuming, consisting of about 12 different trips up stairs and down, from one counter to the next and back again. And again. And again. The whole thing was horrendously expensive and dragged out by people stopping for lunch, a break, a scratch, a pee, whatever. There are dozens of applications on any one day and people start getting crankier and crankier as the day grinds on. I tried to cut the whole process short by just extending my tourist visa rather than going for the required "Non-Immigrant Resident" papers. That requires several letters, forms and notarized documents all to be submitted in triplicate with the accompanying fees. Then you wait a few weeks to hear what the decision is — and you have to be there in person to hear it...

How long *will* it take? Usually, a lot longer than most people realize, since most international applications involve compounding levels of bureaucracy. Everyone from the Foreign Ministry to the municipal board might be in on the decision, which means that after you have done what you can, you must get on with your life, because it will probably be awhile before anything happens. To further complicate things, officials are usually even more cautious about accepting you from overseas than they are about accepting you at home, because the costs of failure are that much higher.

So, applications for various scholarships and work programs are often lengthy, complicated, exhausting affairs asking for far more details than might seem to be relevant to the position. You often have to write essays explaining and justifying yourself. They might ask for official transcripts running back to high school, and copies of all the diplomas, certificates and professional documents you have accumulated over the years, as well as reference letters from all the former teachers, professors, employers and landlords who can remember you. There might be several rounds of interviews even before your application is sent overseas, and all this might have to be accomplished a

year or more before you intend to go. Then, of course, there will be passports and visas and working permits to be arranged, and you might just have everything together to find that some international crisis or domestic event has caused the cancellation of your program.

Does that sound like a worst-case scenario? Perhaps it is — but the point is that it usually takes a lot of time and effort to find, research and get into the program or situation that is good for you. If you aren't prepared for this effort, and the usual frustrations and setbacks of the “search” period, then you might lose heart and give up too soon. Don't! It might take a few applications to the same program before you succeed — but every time you try you learn something new, and get closer to your goal.

FOCUSSING YOUR EFFORTS

There is nothing less impressive in an employer's or academic's office than a limp reply to the inevitable question, “What do you want to do?” And yet many people who wish to go abroad get stuck at this fundamental point in their search. There is so much to choose from...

How do you figure out what you want to do? There seem to be as many answers as there are people, and the best method for any one of us might be the worst for another. But probably the answer lies in the direction of gathering information. Perhaps all you know is that somehow you want to go abroad. Follow that up by soaking up as much information as you can about the aspects that interest you. Talk to people who have gone, find out about their particular fields and experiences. Read all the relevant literature, visit your local university international centre and the cultural centres of various ethnic groups in your city, do some volunteer work with an international group in your town. And do some good thinking about your own strengths and abilities, and what you can offer an overseas employer, or bring to a study program abroad.

Somewhere along the line you will want to make a decision concerning the focus of your efforts to go abroad. Are you most interested in working or studying in a particular field, or in a particular country or region? If you know the field, then you can start researching the regions that are most in need of your skills, or have the most academic opportunities. If you know the regions, you can research the fields they need help with, or the programs open to foreigners.

Having a focus is the key. If you know what you are looking for, then even a mountain of information will become a manageable rock pile soon enough.

TRADITIONAL SEARCH TECHNIQUES — JOBS

Traditional search techniques for jobs abroad are the most widely used but, unfortunately, not always the most effective means available for the majority of people wishing to go abroad to work or study. They include:

- answering newspaper ads
- placing newspaper ads
- going to private employment or placement agencies
- mailing inquiries and résumés directly to organizations
- using public employment agencies.

Richard Nelson Bolles' annual *What Colour is Your Parachute: A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career Changers* includes refreshingly honest discussions of these traditional techniques, and why they so often lead simply to frustration and wounded confidence for job hunters. Of course some people do get jobs using these techniques, and they should not be ignored — if you see the perfect position for you advertised in the newspaper, then you will want to apply, sending in the best résumé you can put together.

The thing to keep in mind is that the odds are not good for any of these techniques. If a job is nationally advertised, for instance, there will be tremendous competition. The sheer numbers of applicants will ensure that a great deal of luck will enter into the decision-making process, even for those with sterling qualifications. Similarly, if you send your résumé to various overseas organizations, you *might* strike a chord and get a positive response, but the odds are likely that you will be filed away along with the hundreds or thousands of others who also wrote in that week, and that you will hear nothing, or receive only the standard computer-coded reply. Employment agencies, too, are handling large numbers of people, and often their allegiance is to the people who pay them — usually the employers — and to the possible repeat customers — again, the employers.

Furthermore, some studies have indicated that up to 85% of positions available are not advertised, or are advertised only in a limited way, which means that only those on the “inside”, within the contact network of the field, find out about them.

Use the traditional techniques, then, but be aware of their limitations.

Some Tips:

Newspapers: It is a good idea to check out the newspapers of the countries you are interested in. These might be available in your local university or main library, the embassy or consulate in your town, or even at specialized magazine and newspaper stores or on the Web. Not only might you find advertised the job you are looking for, you will also get a better feel for the country by reading the paper. Similarly, you can get the information you need for placing a Position Wanted ad in that paper.

Also, check the Travel and Overseas Employment section of your city's newspaper, and of *The Globe and Mail* (National Edition).

Journals and Magazines: Your local university or public library should stock a large number of international magazines, as well as trade and professional journals which might have ads for employment in your line of work. Ask your reference librarian for help.

Telephone Books can be a great source of information, especially the yellow pages. Consult your local university or public library, research library, or the relevant embassy or consulate in your area.

Also Check:

- local international centres
- non-governmental organizations involved in international projects. Even if they don't send people abroad themselves, they often have a research library available to the public, or have contacts with non-governmental organizations that do send people over, and they sometimes get direct requests from overseas for personnel.

- provincial governments
- the Public Service Commission of Canada
- Canadian companies with subsidiaries abroad
- your local church organization
- the careers section of your university or public library, for a plethora of books on résumé writing, interviews, and job-hunting strategies.

TRADITIONAL SEARCH TECHNIQUES — STUDY

The “traditional” techniques for finding study programs, research grants, fellowships, international schools, and student exchanges are probably more effective than the traditional job search techniques, because most applicants are usually already somewhat on the “inside” — they already belong to a school or institution. And your school or institution will probably be the first resource you use. Go to your international office, or your awards officer, and find out what kind of exchanges or programs or links your school has with institutions abroad. Scan the bulletin boards in those offices for new programs that might be offered, and also check out your own department to see if any programs or exchanges are offered.

It is also important not to ignore your library, which should have calendars for many universities around the world, as well as most of the books listed in the bibliography for study abroad in the **Study** section of this book under “**Other Resources and Publications**”. Check your own university calendar carefully — sometimes there are funds available for study abroad in special subject areas, provided you put a proposal together and approach the Grants Committee with a viable plan.

Also — talk to the officers in charge of Awards, Student Placement and International Students. It’s their job to handle student requests and they better than anyone will know what’s out there and how to go after it.

CREATIVE SEARCH TECHNIQUES

More and more, as the inefficiency of traditional search techniques becomes evident, people are turning to more “creative” search techniques. In essence, these techniques recognize that the majority of jobs are not advertised, or are advertised on a limited basis, with most employers relying instead on a trusted network of contacts to exchange information about and hire new employees.

Why don’t employers advertise widely? The main reasons have to do with the time and administrative headaches involved with the formal employee-seeking process, which has not necessarily been proven to supply better results for employers than a few phone calls and an interview or two with a person who has been recommended by someone they trust — a person who is already inside the network.

Networking

It takes a certain amount of self-knowledge, initiative, persistence, and (usually) time for you to break into any given network.

The *self-knowledge* involves knowing what your skills are — the interests, aptitudes, abilities and experiences that make up your special blend of personality — and how they relate to the particular field you want to pursue. Until you've thought thoroughly about how you fit in, it is unlikely that you will be able to convince any employer or academic official of your suitability. It's important to note, however, that the *skills* which you have are not necessarily only those practiced on your last job. Reach into your past, think of your hobbies, your volunteer work, the things that you excel in, and, especially, any international experiences you might have had already.

In order to know how you fit in, of course, you must research not only the organizations that interest you, but the regions and the type of work or study program you want as well. This is where *initiative*, *persistence* and *time* come in. It is also where you start to break into the network of contacts that hopefully will take you overseas, because while you are doing your research, you are also building up your contacts — getting to know the people involved in a certain organization or field, and giving them a chance to get to know you.

Research

Researching an organization means reading its brochures, its annual report, its public literature, but also talking to people who belong to that organization and, ideally, to people who have been sent overseas by them. In that way you get to know what their goals are, what they do, who they are looking for, and who has the power to hire you. If the people they send abroad have two more degrees and eight more years of experience than you do, then you know that they are probably not going to be interested in you, and you can move your search elsewhere. But if you know who they are looking for, and that you fit the bill, then you can prepare well for your real interview, knowing what you want to say and how you want to present yourself.

Information Interviews

Not all interviews have to be job interviews. In fact, *information interviews* are an important part of creative job hunting. Phoning someone up and asking for some of their time because you want information on the type of work they do is much different than phoning someone up and asking for a job. In the information interview you have a general discussion with someone about the possibilities of your getting work. You are asking them what they do, and how they got their job, and what sorts of people are needed, and who else you might want to talk to. You have brought your résumé or sent it ahead, but no one is being put in the position of having to say “Yes” or “No” or, more likely, “We will keep you on file.”

If you pursue a number of information interviews, using your immediate contacts and the new ones you build up to smooth the way for further contacts, then you will quickly learn a great deal about the field you are trying to enter, and you will also have a much better chance of becoming part of the network yourself, which means being in a position to help others as well.

It isn't automatic, but your credentials usually go much further when you present them in person than when they come folded up in the mail. People will remember you, especially when you have written your thank-you note and kept in regular touch with people. And, when the right job opportunity opens up, you just might have the luxury of having someone phone you, to tell you about it.

But – the network I’m interested in is four thousand miles away!

Hence, one of the special problems of finding work abroad. If you think it’s hard to get a job in Canada, try to get someone to answer your letters of inquiry overseas!

What in the World is Going On?, however, has listed in it many *Canadian* organizations that either send people abroad for work or study, or act as the agent for organizations overseas looking for Canadian employees. The Canadian Bureau for International Education and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, for instance, administer a number of scholarship programs on behalf of the Canadian and foreign governments, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) administers a number of Student and Young Worker Exchange Programs. Many international organizations have offices or affiliations here in Canada, which means that often the network you want to break into *is* accessible and, in fact, is quite small as well.

Networking and Study Abroad

Many scholarship, research grant, and study abroad programs (especially those that offer a generous amount of money and support) are quite formal in their selection process, and want to *avoid* all appearances of having made their selection on the basis of “contacts” rather than “merit”. It is still a good idea, nonetheless, to find out as much as possible about the program and about who they are looking for. Do your homework — talk to people they have sponsored before, and read up on the country, the school, the program.

In these cases, your *application* becomes all important. Sometimes it will be used as the sole criterion for judgement, or it will be used to select those who will get an interview, and to weed out those who won’t. Some tips:

- Be neat and accurate. Write a first draft to make sure your wording is as good as it can be, and keep a copy so you can remember exactly what you said. While you may hand print the application form, all attachments must be typed.
- Accentuate the relevant information. Be concise, but don’t sell yourself short. If you have further relevant qualifications or experiences which should be listed (but won’t fit in the little box), attach an extra sheet, or perhaps a full résumé.
- Make a real effort on your research or study proposal. Prepare properly, contact foreign institutions, put a reasonable budget together. You are going to have to convince people that your project is *useful, viable*, and that *you have the qualifications to do it*.
- Sign up some good references and treat them like gold. Phone or write to explain exactly what you want to do, and to ask them to back you. Especially, thank them, in writing, whether you are successful or not.

The “Real” Interview

Professionals from organizations which regularly send people abroad to work or study interview large numbers of people, assessing their “suitability” for the particular position at hand, and for life overseas in general. Check over the chapter on assessing your own suitability to find out the types of things they are looking for. Often they are trying to catch danger signals, reasons why you would not be a good bet to send overseas. These include:

- signs of prejudice, inflexibility, fixed thinking
- over-romanticization of the coming “adventure”
- lack of experience outside of one’s home town or province

Conversely, many of them *are* looking for:

- confidence, adaptability, enthusiasm
- sense of humour; balanced approach to life
- knowledge of the organization and the project at hand
- a good blend of motivation to tackle the project, and a realistic sense of what can be accomplished



V

EVALUATING AN OFFER

Somewhere along the line, something has gone right, and now you have an offer for work or study overseas. Perhaps they are paying the moon; perhaps you are paying the moon; probably the truth lies somewhere in between. Money, of course, is important, yet there are many other things to be considered as well when evaluating an offer for overseas work or study.

We might as well *start* with the money, though:

One of the universal aspects of any travel abroad is the mental fumbling that goes on when trying to relate another country's money to what one is used to. So maybe the first question to consider in evaluating the offer concerns the *currency* in which they are paying you, or you are paying them. Is it Canadian dollars? American? The local brand? What happens in the case of currency fluctuations? Does what you owe or are owed change also, or are there provisions to cover that sort of thing? Also, are there any restrictions on how much money you can bring into or take out of a country? And can you change the local money into Canadian dollars when you decide to come home?

The worth of the local money, of course, depends a great deal on the *cost of living*. It is important to not simply think in Canadian terms, then, when evaluating the traditional bottom line. A salary of \$20,000 Canadian, for instance, might either be good or bad news, depending on where it is you will be. That salary in most developing countries is princely, and will give you a standard of living far in excess of what is possible for the average citizen. But in one of the expensive cities of the developed world you might have trouble paying your rent with it, especially if you have dependents, and your lifestyle might be leaner than you would care for.

Then again, a princely existence in a developing country and a lean existence in a developed country might work out to about the same thing, considering the general standards of living found worldwide. Or, they might be extremely different — you might have far more space, comfort, leisure and travel time in the poorest corner of the world than you ever had at home. The key is to know what you want and what you can expect, so that things can be planned for and anticipated.

Another important consideration when thinking about money in general is your *emergency fund*, which should be in a safe place, probably at home, but which you can have access to in case of emergencies. If you do not have the money, then at least arrange for a family member or a friend to back you, so that money can be wired to you quickly. In case of emergencies, you will want funds outside of your salary or fellowship, if only to give you the peace of mind to know that even if things go very, very wrong you can still get out and home with your own resources.

Other things to consider:

Travel Expenses: Be sure you know if they are included in your package, and also, *what* they include. If you get “return economy airfare” does that cover your travel costs to and from the various airports? And does “economy” mean that you will emerge at the end of your trip feeling like you have just spent forty-eight hours locked in a laundromat with the windows closed and all machines running? Also:

- Is there an allowance for overweight baggage? For shipping costs?
- Do your expenses cover internal travel in your new country?
- Is the organization flexible enough to accommodate any special plans you might have for travel before or after your assignment or study term? (Will they agree to give you a sum of money and let you make your own travel arrangements?)

Benefits:

- *Health insurance.* What does your plan entail? Are hospitalization costs abroad covered? What about travel home in case of grave illness or injury? Does the health plan include family members who have come with you? Also, contact your provincial health insurance agency to make any arrangements necessary to either maintain your insurance while you are away, or have it re-start once you get back.
- *Family benefits.* These might include stipends or allowances for family members, educational allowances to cover school costs for children, and special allowances according to the number of dependents you have.
- *Accommodation subsidies.* These are meant to pay for or offset the costs of accommodation while abroad. Sometimes meals are included, sometimes they are not.
- *Other benefits:* life insurance, property insurance, dental plan, eye care package, etc. These types of benefits are valuable and can augment a salary a great deal. However, many organizations simply do not have the funds to support their overseas people in such a comprehensive way.

Study Allowances: Special study allowances might include:

- *Tuition.* Be sure you know what fees are included (and not included), how many school terms are covered in the agreement, and whether the award is renewable for another year or term.
- *Book allowances.* Find out if these include the cost of shipping books from home.
- *Thesis costs.* Some programs subsidize the printing costs of a thesis for Master’s or Doctoral students.
- *Language instruction.* Some institutions provide or subsidize language instruction for foreign students.

When evaluating your offer for a work position or study program overseas, it’s a good idea to be clear on the length of your *commitment*. Terms abroad can range from just a few weeks to several years; many are flexible, with a set term and an agreement for an extension if the project and the personnel are working out. Is your scholarship renewable? If so, how many people actually *get* theirs renewed?

Also, how solid is the *financial background of your organization*? Is it a new program? Are they likely to lose their funding while you are overseas? Are they asking you to put up

money which they will reimburse later on? It's important to have confidence in the stability of your program, knowing too that they will be able to provide special support in case of unanticipated problems in the course of your stay.

OTHER SUPPORTS: ANYTHING ELSE YOU NEED?

Another thing to consider when evaluating an offer for an overseas work position or study program is the support your organization is willing or able to give you in terms of preparing you for the experience, providing assistance while you are overseas, and aiding you in your ultimate return. Increasingly it is becoming apparent that the better the orientation, on-going assistance and de-briefing/re-entry assistance, the more likely is the success of a stint abroad for most people. Be wary if your organization seems to be simply giving you a ticket and some money and saying, "See you in two years!" They might be setting you up for a rollercoaster ride through fog with no brakes, no seatbelt, and not a lot to hang onto.

What might you be missing out on? Here's a quick survey of some of the supports offered by established organizations sending people abroad:

Orientations: Orientations can be valuable for preparing anyone for the general prospect of living abroad, and also for providing specific information about the region, country, city, people, culture, program, and work associated with the assignment. Some orientations can be elaborate, with groups gathered in a central place and exposed to courses, workshops and seminars for days or weeks at a time. Here are some topics which commonly come up in orientations:

- area briefings
- bringing the family overseas
- coping strategies for relocation
- coping tactics for the spouse/children
- cross-cultural communication and adaptation
- culture shock
- development education
- the education system in the host country
- first aid
- health care
- host country formalities — visas, currency controls, regulations for visiting students and workers
- language
- philosophy of the organization
- preparations for departure
- professional development
- religion, history, geography, politics of the region

- security
- stress management

Many organizations provide an arrival orientation in the assigned country once the personnel have gotten to their destinations. Orientations often feature returnees who can give a Canadian's perspective on the particular region you are going to and life you might be leading.

There it is. My station. Finally. It is 1:00 a.m. I've been travelling for 30 hours. The conductor says to me, "This is it." I look out the open train door. This is it? There isn't even a platform, just a gravel path. I jump down, the conductor tosses me my bag, and the train takes off.

Here I am. The place I was so anxious to get to. I make my way through the weeds and rocks to what I imagine is the platform, spot the attendant and ask, "Where is there a phone?" He pauses. He chews his tongue. He ponders. Then: "There is no phone here." Of course there's no phone. Where do I think I am, Kipling Station?

On-Going Assistance: What kind of on-going assistance and support can your organization offer you while you are away? Consider that many organizations provide regular professional development meetings, built-in support groups, regular or periodic supervision (someone who actually comes to visit you in your lonely outpost), as well as help with the thousand and one possible minor and major problems that are bound to crop up. They might help with your mail, getting materials for your work or research, your travel arrangements, medical difficulties, sorting through bewildering episodes with the local authorities, and making sure that your pay comes on time and your insurance and taxes are in order.

Going without these types of supports from your organization does not mean that you will not have a good experience overseas. But having these supports can make things much easier, and more likely than not you'll appreciate them at the time.

De-Briefing/Re-entry: One of the hardest parts of the overseas experience for many is coming back. And many organizations, even those that are great at orientations and ongoing support, forget about re-entry assistance, or make a halfhearted stab at it, or simply have run out of money for your project and leave the bulk of the "adjusting" up to you. When researching an organization, find out what happens to their people when they come back. Where do they go? What do they do? Are their talents and experiences used by the organization to improve the program? Does the organization help them find new work, get into other study programs, reintegrate smoothly into Canadian society? Are there support programs for the spouse and family?

Most organizations wouldn't dream of sending you overseas without preparing you first; but there should be similar preparations for your return as well, since the changes can be of the same magnitude, and since most of us don't *expect* that coming back to what was once familiar will be as difficult as going to what will be strange.

Finally, remember that whether you are going to be working or studying, *conditions and conventions* which we take for granted might not apply in a foreign country. That's why it is a good idea to check out the hours you will be expected to work, the number of courses you will have to take, the type of education system you are entering, the number of days

that make up the work week, the time off that you will get. The point is not necessarily to demand “Canadian” conditions — in fact, if you are going to take an inflexible stance on these sorts of things, it might be good to consider staying home — but to make sure you know what is expected, and that everything is open and above board. That way if the local authorities are demanding too much and you find yourself getting burned-out, you can get your organization to back you.

In short, if you *know* what you are getting into you can prepare yourself properly, and the organization that helps you to do that is an admirable one.

In Gabon, the supermarket in the capital, M'BOLO, has the reputation of being the best in West Africa, and therefore you can find most of the products you are used to and most of the things your children crave. So we shopped there happily, thinking how lucky we were to find cornflakes nearly every week until we came back to Canada, where in any supermarket you find shelves and shelves of cereals, enough to make you dizzy trying to decide which one to buy. Of course you have forgotten that so many different types of cereal exist, and after so many years abroad, there are new ones too. After 10 minutes, unable to decide what cereal to buy, you leave the supermarket, exhausted, and wondering how you are going to cope with buying cereal each week. At this point you begin to wonder, after all, if cereal really is indispensable. We decided to do without it for awhile.



VI

PREPARING YOURSELF

So let me tell you about my bath and compare it to Canada where the worst that can happen is the phone rings mid-shower. It was a hot day so T. and I headed off with soap, shampoo and dirty laundry. We arrived at the spring and found four soldiers there ahead of us. So we decided to do our laundry first under the watchful eyes of the machine-gun toting guard. Ever lathered up your underwear while being chatted up by someone toting an M-16? The after-lunch crowd of women began to arrive with dirty pots, blankets and the occasional kid for scrubbing. One soldier in his underpants, soaped from head to toe, loudly proposed marriage. ... Later on, when I was bathing stark naked, two men returned from woodcutting and passed by laughing. A while later two more came by but by now I was dressed and so they stopped to chat with the women (who find it all highly amusing) while inspecting T. who had only a towel on. Our mothers didn't prepare us for anything like it.

What sorts of things can you do to prepare yourself for a work or study term abroad, even given limited time?

Begin at the End: What are you going to do when you come back?

Some experienced Canadian travellers consider this an important question with which to begin. Coming back can be a shock. It can also be difficult to set up anything for yourself while you are away. You might not be able to call anyone, or get any replies to your letters of inquiry. You probably won't have quick access to the type of information you will need to know in order to apply, and you certainly won't be able to drop by in person at an opportune moment. Yet the frustrations of coming back "cold", of not knowing where to go, what to do, how to fit in, can sour your whole experience abroad, and lead to depression and bitter feelings.

So — have you got a long-term plan? Where does this term abroad fit in the context of your career, your life goals? If you can, set something up with an employer, school, or institution before you go. Are you quitting work to go abroad? Consider negotiating a leave of absence instead, impressing upon your organization the new communication skills and maturity you will have gained along with your international perspective.

In short — don't burn your bridges, because they might be important for the return trip.

Self-Examination

Many of the important preparations for a term abroad should happen inside yourself, because that is where much of the challenge, development and drama of the overseas experience is played out and dealt with. Immersing yourself in another culture means having to deal with a certain amount of confusion, insecurity and frustration. You will

want to do some strong thinking beforehand then, in order to keep your bearings, your balance, and your sense of you in the whole scheme of things.

Here are some questions you might want to ponder as part of your preparations:

- Why am I doing this? What are my goals? What do I hope to get out of this experience — personally, academically, professionally, spiritually? What can I hope to give? Are these goals reasonable? Do they make sense? Are they likely to be achieved, or am I setting myself up for failure?
- What are my expectations? What is the culture going to be like? The country? The people? The work? What is this whole experience going to be like? Will I be able to relate it to things I have done before? What are the challenges going to be for me? How will I manage in the face of those challenges?
- What do I *really know* about this country I am going to — the language, culture, history, religion, traditions, philosophy, ways of thinking, social conventions, class structures, food, political realities, role of women, everyday life?
- What are my support structures in Canada? What are the things that make life much more pleasant for me at home, and which I would miss badly if they were left behind? Who are the people I rely on at home? How can I keep in touch with them? What are my patterns of exercise, recreation, sleep, work, eating? How important are these to my sense of well-being? How do I react to sudden changes in these patterns? What can I do to build up new support structures overseas, keeping in mind that it is important to keep in touch with the person I was before I went?

Language Learning

My counterpart felt, I think, that I was slow, since I arrived knowing barely a word or two of her language. She agreed to teach me though and it took awhile, a week or two, before she realized that I was picking up the odd word here and there, understanding little snatches of conversation. My favorite time was when we were going through the kitchen and she told me the word for this, the word for that, and I repeated them, and then she picked something up and said, “pulay-ate”, and made me repeat it, and then another thing, “guhlahsse”...

If you know English or French, or both, then you have a pretty good language base for going to many different places around the world and being understood. But if you want to live in a non-Anglophone or non-Francophone country for a time and get to know something about its culture, then you will want to speak the local language(s).

Fair enough, and easily said. Many of us have good intentions; we buy the books and tapes, and make an effort, and still even after months, or years, the best we can do is stammer a few phrases. And we feel guilty about our shortcomings, which creates even more barriers to communication.

For some adults, language learning comes naturally, but for most it is a trial, accompanied by feelings of confusion, frustration and stupidity. Even people who have studied for years and become proficient sometimes despair of ever being able to master a language the way a native speaker has. For learning a language there is nothing like actually living in the culture where the language is spoken; but there is no guarantee that in living there, you will automatically learn the language.

Any smattering of words you do learn, however, is more helpful than none at all, and for the few locals who will laugh at your fumbling efforts, there will probably be many more who appreciate those efforts.

Some experienced travellers recommend that you decide early on, before you go, what you are going to do about language — whether you will put a lot of effort into learning it, or forget about it, and learn about the culture in some other way. It depends upon you, your abilities, and your situation. Spend some time thinking about it, and considering what will be involved, what there is to be gained, and how best to go about either learning the language, or functioning well without it (and putting aside your guilt).

Research

The more you know about a country before you go, the further you are towards understanding that country's ways and culture once you arrive. So it's good to do a lot of reading about the history, culture, religion, politics, geography, demographics, anthropology, languages, sociology, agriculture, environmental concerns, business, government, armed forces, industries anything that particularly interests you about that country or region. If you know quite a bit about these topics before you go, then many of the things that you see will be understandable, will fit in somewhere with something you read or heard or saw in a film.

If you are going abroad to study do some research on the type of education system in that country. Find out about the philosophy of the particular institution you are going to, the relationships between students and professors, the conventions of etiquette and respect that are practiced. What is appropriate clothing? Should you ask questions during a lecture? Can you make appointments to see your teachers, and what is appropriate behaviour during such an appointment? Don't take any of these sorts of questions for granted — do as much research as you can before going, to avoid possible disasters when you arrive.

Sources:

- *The Web.*
- *The local library:* Invaluable for maps, encyclopedias, newspapers, periodicals, and relevant books. Be careful about travel pieces — many of them are public relations materials meant to attract tourists, and they can heighten or skew expectations.
- *Local resource centres or non-governmental organizations* often have information centres open to the public, with specific pamphlets, reports, books and films that might not be widely available.
- *Returnees:* People who have recently returned from the area you are interested in are usually more than happy to share their experiences, advice, and contacts.
- *Embassies or consulates:* You may have to visit one or the other anyway to get a work permit or visa. Talk to their information officers. Gather whatever materials they have available to the public.
- Finally, *community members* who are actually from the country where you are going are excellent sources of information. Indicate your interest, do some volunteer work for their community organizations. They might be able to help you a great deal in your preparations to visit the part of the world from which they come.

Preparing Your Supports

As part of your preparations, it's good to do some serious thinking about your support network at home, and how you can maintain the most important aspects while abroad, and replace the missing sections with new supports.

Should you work hard to reproduce your Canadian lifestyle wherever you go? No, definitely not. But we are all part of a social system, culture, constellation of friends and family, with which we interact and upon which we depend. When we leave there is a gap, a *need* to become part of another system, constellation, network of support. And it isn't just social relationships, either — our habits, hobbies, daily patterns of exercise, eating, prayer, work and entertainment contribute greatly to the whole pattern of what we enjoy in our lives and what supports us.

So, here are some suggestions for preparing your supports:

Line up your correspondents. Many people find that during their stint overseas, mail from home takes on a significance previously unimagined. So — make the most of it. Give out your address early and write lots of cards or letters as soon as you arrive. For the people who are most special, set up a schedule, rather than simply waiting to respond to their letters, since mail service might be slow or intermittent. Also, arrange to have a few people save your letters for you — they might add up to a valuable journal over time. If letter-writing is not a strong suit, try making cassette tapes for your friends and family. You may also be able to set up an email account.

Magazines. North American journals and magazines take on new meaning when you are abroad, seeing things with an “international” perspective. In many ways you will be reappraising your own culture's concerns, obsessions, strong points, blind spots...and magazines can be wonderful reminders of the grandeur and trivia that make up our culture. They can also be great for “escape” purposes — for those times when you have to take a break from your international experience. International subscriptions can of course be expensive, especially for airmail orders. If you order surface mail a few months in advance, you should be able to enjoy only slightly aged news at a fraction of the cost of getting it just a week late.

Bring your hobby. And your exercise paraphernalia. The things that you love to do to pass the time. Games are good, especially the portable ones. They can be an easy way to get to know some of the local people, because often you can play with limited language.

The key is to not divest yourself of all your familiar clothing before plunging into another culture, so you can keep contact with who you are and where you are from. You are not going to instantly assimilate, and if your old culture seems to have simply vanished without a trace, then you will feel terribly disoriented, so far from home.

Also, in keeping with your role as a guest in another country, *remember your hosts*. Pack some small, portable gifts for appropriate occasions. People will want to see where you live too — what your house, city, family, dog and cat look like, so it's nice to have pictures of them on hand.

LOGISTICS: ALL THOSE PRACTICAL THINGS...

Of which there are a thousand and three, and little room here to go over them. The following is a list of points, hints and suggestions among the myriad things to remember in the hectic months, weeks, days leading up to your departure²:

Get passports, work permits, and visas in order. Depending on the bureaucracy and what you have to do, this might take several months, so make it a priority. If possible, avoid having to make phone calls to important officials scant hours before your plane takes off.

Have a family meeting. If you have kids, explain to them what is going to happen during the coming weeks. Go over your main strategy and give everybody a chance to participate in the preparations and to feel useful.

Make an inventory of household effects. Plan what will be taken, what will be stored, where it will be stored, and what will be sold or disposed of. Plan the *hows* of your move, storage, sale or disposal.

Look after your debts. They have a way of finding you no matter where you go, or of waiting most loyally for your auspicious return.

Make a will, if you haven't one already. It might be literally the last thing you want to think about, but should be done in consideration of others. The bureaucracy of death can become absurdly complicated when more than one country is involved.

Contact Revenue Canada and find out what is going to happen concerning your taxes. Get as clear information as you can, so that you can know your tax status and file a proper return while you are away or once you come back. Contact the International Taxation Office, 2204 Walkley Road, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 1A8; call 1-800-267-5177, or in Ottawa-Hull call 952-3741.

Arrange your finances so that an emergency fund from home will be available to you at short notice when you are abroad. You might also want to rent a safety deposit box to store your valuables and financial papers. Get a credit card if you haven't one already — they can be invaluable in emergencies, even in far-flung corners of the world.

Have a physical done. Arrange to get your shots. Find out about health and medical matters where you are going.

Gather together your important documents and personal papers. Make duplicates of the following to bring with you:

- medical and dental records, vaccination certificates, prescriptions for medicines and glasses
- employment reference letters
- letters of introduction from your club, lodge, church, associations
- your children's school records

Get adapters for your electrical appliances. Look up the voltage used in the country where you are going.

²Source: Foreign Affairs Canada, *Foreign Service Guide*

Stock up on your pharmaceutical needs and other necessities. Put together a first aid kit, sewing kit, basic tool kit.

Get appropriate clothes for your destination, according to the customs, climate, what you are going to be doing, and how much you can take. Are there special restrictions on dress? For most places you will want to take sturdy, comfortable clothes you will be able to live with (and wear) a long time. Make sure you cover a variety of weather conditions. Also, find out what sorts of clothes you can buy once you are there, and what sorts you can't.

Make a budget. Balance off what you will be making and what you will be bringing with you, with your expected expenditures. Leave plenty of room for Travel, Local Shopping, Emergencies, and Unforeseen Expenses.

Say your good-byes to family and friends. Re-visit your favorite spots. Take the time to see people. And don't forget your kids — organize a party or a special outing for them and their friends.

When you are packing your bags, leave your *sense of humour* on top, where you can get at it easily. Hey! You're on your way!

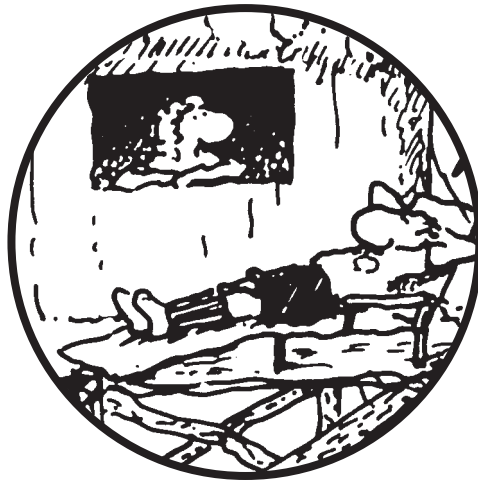
If you think that doing all those practical things before leaving was tiring and getting there will be a relief, you are right. The only thing is that the relief does not last long.

Finally you do not have to dream about your new place. You have arrived and you think the whole country is expecting you...but in fact no one is expecting you, and no one really knows why you came.

My husband had a contract as the first teacher of electronics at the University, and it took him a long time to

- a) find someone who knew something about him*
- b) even longer to find out what he was supposed to be doing*
- c) much longer to find who were his students.*

So you have to be very patient; eventually everything will fall into place.



VII

THE MIDDLE OF THE TOUGH PART: SUCCEEDING OVERSEAS

I heard a story once about a Canadian living in a large, crowded, noisy foreign city. The heat was unbearable most of the year. The crowding was something that you just lived with, every day from the moment you clawed your way onto a bus in the morning to the evening when everyone spilled out of their houses and onto the street so that you could not even walk a straight line, you had to always be turning your shoulders to get around someone. But the worst was the noise, which did not ever seem to stop, not even at night, because this was a round-the-clock type of city, which started at sunrise and went full-tilt till the early morning hours, when it would catch its breath momentarily before starting once again. The streets during the day were blocked with cars and trucks and the drivers used their horns like hockey players use their sticks, and, even worse, there was a perpetual construction crew jackhammering in front of the building where the man worked six days a week.

Finally, it got to him. He had just arrived home after work and shut his doors and windows and lay down with a long, cool drink when the relative silence of the minor street on which he lived was blasted to bits by a full-orchestra cement truck which was thundering through even though the alley was so narrow the bulging truck could barely keep from scratching the houses on either side.

The man snapped. He grabbed his umbrella and catapulted out of his house and straight into the path of the on-coming monster which was belching diesel exhaust, rumbling like an earthquake and coming down the hill so fast it was not entirely certain it could stop at short notice.

But the man shook his umbrella at the beast and let loose a stream of his own black air believing, apparently, that at least with death would come the release of blessed silence.

The cement truck did stop, barely inches from the crazy foreigner and the driver who under normal circumstances would have simply run over any pedestrian stupid enough to stand in the middle of a street, thought better of it this time. Perhaps he saw the wild look in the foreigner's eyes. At any rate, he threw the truck into reverse, and allowed the demon with the black umbrella to chase him all the way back up the hill, and onto a major street.

WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

Professionals in the field of cultural adaptation often refer to adjustment curves which map out the emotional swings most people go through when adjusting to a new culture. Sometimes in the beginning there is a “high”: you are excited, stimulated, seeing new things, meeting new people, writing exuberant postcards to friends and family back home. Or maybe it’s a “low”: you are exhausted after all the preparations, good-byes, travel, and not at your best to cope with a lot of change. After a period of time, perhaps three to six months if you are staying for a year or more, perhaps much less if you are not staying that long, there can be a much worse “low”, known as culture shock.

Culture shock seems to hit almost everyone to some degree or other. There are many different ways of dealing with it, and what happens after that phase is key in determining how successful a stint abroad will be. Some people pull out of culture shock to become *Participants* — they explore further, learn the language, make friends with the locals, bring a great deal of energy to their work and relationships. Some become *Adjustors* — they do an adequate job, manage to get by, but somehow seem to be withdrawing into themselves and perhaps even rejecting their environment. Some become *Escapers*, openly rejecting the home environment and doing all they can to recreate a bit of their “real” home in this foreign outpost in which they have found themselves. And others, of course, never do learn to cope with the emotional problems of adjusting to the new culture, and have to leave early.

CULTURE SHOCK

We live in a compound that houses a seminary, hospital and college. A very welcome and silent, green retreat from the smog and noise of the world outside the walls. In the house it is always bathrooms full of drying underwear, the latest disco hits on the radio, curlers and general hen-party atmosphere. The distinguishing marks are the occasional lizard running across the wall, the cockroaches in the kitchen, the food like goat innards in blood sauce or strange vegetables sauteed in coconut oil, dished up with a mountain of rice three times a day, and the tropical vegetation, that marks the differences between us and middle America.

Culture has been defined as “an integrated system of learned behaviour patterns which are characteristic of the members of any given society.” It encompasses the total way of life of any particular group of people — their customs, language, traditions, myths, shared feelings and attitudes. Adapting to a new culture means somehow managing to step outside your own integrated system of learned behaviour patterns and into that of another group. That’s a difficult change of clothes for most of us to manage, and there is usually quite a bit of stress involved.

On my very first day I was, quite literally, struck by the poverty and suffering I saw around me. A leper reached out and touched my face while I was walking down the street. Another beggar grabbed my ankle; a crowd of children surrounded me asking for money. What can you do? How much can you give? The sanitary conditions were appalling — babies peeing down their mothers’ sides; garbage, filth, sewage mixed in the gutters...

What sorts of cultural differences might you encounter? Well, too many to name, but perhaps a few examples are in order. Depending on people's reactions, some cultural differences become the stuff of fine stories, while others simply contribute to a terrible build-up of frustrations and bitterness.

We had been there long enough, and were just beginning to think we understood the customs, when we decided to do a little travelling. In one little town we stopped at a local pub to use their facilities. We meant to be on our way directly, but found we had insulted the proprietor gravely by using the wash-room and then trying to leave without buying a drink. He cursed, gestured, shouted at us angrily, and days later there we were still thinking about it, many miles down the road.

The pace of life at the college is quite relaxed. Everyone takes a nap in the afternoon after lunch. Classes are mainly in the morning: sports are played in the late afternoon, even the compulsory meetings are slowpaced affairs in which it is not compulsory to listen to what is being said. Most people are able to recite the proper phrases when they need to, but don't normally give a thought to them, and go on with their lives in the usual way. The only problem is that they bring the same attitudes into my classroom — they don't listen to anything I say!

The thing I couldn't stand was this professor, reading a book at us for the entire 90 minute period, repeating phrases over and over as if by sheer repetition the material would become part of our cell matter. But he never explained anything and there was no time for oral practice, and if you asked him a question he'd think you were challenging his authority and start yelling at you!

The most difficult part of living here is the boredom. It seems to be an accepted fact of life. The women keep pretty busy for the most part but the men, youths and children spend vast stretches of time doing nothing. They no longer have any of their traditional crafts such as weaving, carving, basket making or tattooing. Songs, dances and music are very simple, repetitive and storytelling is almost non-existent. With the new system men are no longer required as guards or warriors. We are fortunate to live in a house with four rooms but these people often live 6 or 7 to one the size of an average Canadian bathroom. When typhoon season begins and a storm hits, you stay inside for four or five days. For those of us raised in a culture where privacy is respected and the need for occasional solitude understood, it can be trying at times. And you have to be very careful not to let feelings of dislike, annoyance or irritation get out of hand. You still have to eat, sleep, bathe and share lice with each other...

It's having to deal with cultural episodes like these, multiplied again and again, accumulating over time, which lead to the fatigue and depression of culture shock.

Symptoms of culture shock include:

- Homesickness
- Withdrawal; spending excessive amounts of time in your room, reading, or writing letters home; only spending time with other Canadians or foreigners; avoiding contact with locals
- Very negative feelings about the host people, culture, country; exaggerating problems; stereotyping large groups of people; suspicion and paranoia
- Anger, frustration, confusion; feeling of being lost in ambiguity
- Compulsive eating and drinking; need for excessive amounts of sleep
- Marital stress; family conflicts; irritability; loss of sense of humour
- Boredom; tiredness; inability to concentrate or work effectively
- Excesses of emotion; over-reaction; worry
- Obsession with cleanliness, avoiding disease
- Large fluctuations in weight

COPING STRATEGIES

Probably the best overall strategy for coping with the various manifestations of culture shock is to *be active* in your attempts to adjust to the new culture. Once you recognize the signs of malaise and negativity associated with culture shock, you might want to take a two-pronged approach to your activism: use your supports to make you feel more comfortable, and force yourself to *do* things which will make the strange surroundings more understandable to you. Some suggestions for both getting over culture shock, and getting the most out of your stay abroad:

Home Supports:

- *Write letters.* Keep a journal. Keep in touch with the people you have left behind.
- *Keep close professional notes* and take photographs, so that you can write articles or make presentations afterwards. Commit yourself to presenting these experiences once you return to Canada.
- *Listen to your favourite tapes,* to shortwave radio; read novels and magazines; keep some time aside to “escape”.
- *Stay healthy.* Eat properly, exercise, get your sleep, don’t over-extend yourself. Know your limits. Some people get so caught up in the excitement of an overseas trip that they forget about the things they naturally do at home to avoid illness. Watch out for alcohol consumption — it can go up dramatically during culture shock.
- *Take a break every so often* and enjoy the other Canadians and foreigners who might also be posted in your community. If you have problems and your organization can’t help, try visiting the local Canadian consulate or embassy. At the same time, however, beware of the “foreign ghetto syndrome” — the tightly knotted groups of expatriates who feed on one another’s gripes to create an ever-deepening cycle of bitterness, pessimism, and negativity. As much as possible, spend time with people who

are up-beat, positive, and who are out *doing* things to involve them in their surroundings.

Participating in the New Culture:

- *Be active.* Become interested in some aspect of the new culture — the literature, painting, art, architecture, music, martial arts, history, education, dance, films, sports, games, crafts... whatever. Being an interested student can open a lot of doors. Try to learn something endemic to that culture which you can take home with you and share with others.
- *Go with low expectations.* Don't be pessimistic or negative, but expect difficulties, and tone down any fantasies of the wonderful things that might happen. After all, every country and culture has its problems, and its low-key, day to day realities.
- *Be a bit of a diplomat, and a very good guest.* When you first arrive, look, listen, smell, think, but don't say too much. Soak in everything you can. Put aside your assumptions; be extremely sensitive to cultural differences. Show respect, use the right titles for people, do things according to the local customs. Try to find a logical reason for everything you are seeing, and to explain things from the national's point of view.
- *Travel.* Take the time to be a tourist and see what sorts of things are the focus of national pride. Bring an open mind, a keen eye, and a sense of humour.
- *Avoid romanticizing life back home.* Similarly, don't give in to the temptation to disparage the host culture, to make jokes or snide remarks about "them". Actively choose to stay in a positive frame of mind.
- *Make friends with the people around you.* Let them help you in your adjustment. Spend time with them, get to know them slowly, on a day to day basis. Meet them more than half-way, but be sensitive about being too aggressive for a particular culture. The ones who succeed overseas are usually *user-friendly* — they know how to communicate, to help out, get along, adapt to the pace of the culture, and they orient themselves more towards the people than towards the particular job at hand.
- *Take on the challenges you can handle, but don't overdo it.* So often people living abroad are given the opportunity to fill many needs, and it can be extremely enriching to take on those extra responsibilities, be they teaching a language course, helping out in the community, acting as a cultural ambassador. But at the same time, you have to be aware of your limitations, and know when to say "No".
- *To the best of your ability learn the language.* If you really want to manage in a foreign culture, practice every chance you get. It all pays off. Language acquisition can be exciting and fulfilling, especially when you get beyond the initial awkwardness and frustration. Do it! It is often the difference between a disappointing stint abroad and a successful one.
- *Keep a sense of perspective.* Remember — your stay overseas is going to be limited. Most are only for two years or less, which will be over faster than you know. Do the most you can to fill it well, do not waste your opportunity!

In Canada, the police will stop you if you speed, or if you do not wear your seat belt or if you commit an infraction. But you should not expect that to be the international rule. In Africa, you probably will not be stopped if you

speed, and no one will ask you to wear a seat belt. But you might be stopped by the police asking:

— Where is your green card?

— I do not have a green card.

— So it will be \$100.

— But I never heard of a green card and I have been here for three years.

— So it will be \$300.

At that point you either pay the fine if you are in a hurry or decide to take the time to investigate this mysterious green card. If you do so you will find out, perhaps much later, that it never existed!



VIII

THE REST OF THE TOUGH PART: SO, YOU WANT TO COME HOME?

So I'm sitting there at the desk, thinking, last month I was on a totally different part of the planet, drinking local beer and contemplating my place under the stars after finishing up the hardest, most satisfying project I'd ever done in my life. And now here I am back home, short of money, talking to this man in a suit, who is looking over my paper credentials and saying, "Yes, but what about your Canadian experience?"

Coming home is the anti-climax of a lot of work and study terms abroad. For many people, especially those who were successful at participating in the culture and who got swept up in the enthusiasm of learning, giving, and seeing the world with new eyes, the return home is a disappointment. They have changed, grown, worked through great challenges; their friends are still doing the same old things. Their values have been transformed; the values at home are drearily familiar. The world has shown itself to them; the people at home are not interested. "So — what are you going to do now?" people ask, and keep on asking, as if that were at all important.

But — you do have to do something, and soon, perhaps, if money is at all a concern. But first there's this thing called *reverse culture shock*. Unfair as it might seem, for many people coming home there are emotional swings similar to the swings they experienced overseas. They have picked up new cultural baggage and will have to get used to not only the Canadian culture they left behind, but also the changes that have happened while they have been away. New technology, films, books, music, scandals, triumphs will have all paraded through, and reading about them in *Macleans* is not the same as being there and experiencing them for yourself.

What can you do to cope? Some suggestions:

While abroad:

- As you did when you were planning to go overseas, *think ahead, make (maintain) your contacts, plan for your return*. What are you going to do? Where will you live? Can you write letters of inquiry? Can you get your family or friends to dig up contacts for you? Can you follow up on the plans you made for your return before you left?
- *Prepare yourself mentally*. Talk about the return with your family and friends who are with you. Ease out of the local situation slowly, leaving time for formalities, gift-giving and good-byes. Try to avoid arriving home exhausted from a marathon round of parties, last minute packing, and the grind of overseas travel.

When you return:

- *Give presentations* to family, friends, community groups, schools, about your experience abroad. Put a slide show together. Write a speech, an article, a report for your organization. Brief others who are going to the same area. Do anything that allows you to process, and pass on, your experiences.
- *Take some time to be a tourist in your own area.* Observe things in the same way you did while abroad. Keep your cultural sensitivity. What are the things you really like about Canada? What are the things you want to keep from the culture you've experienced abroad?
- *Keep your expectations low.* It might take a long time to get a new position, settle in, feel at home again. Use the extra patience, flexibility, and sensitivity you developed overseas to smooth the transition once you come home.
- *Stay active, positive, forward looking.* You are in a new reality now. There will be a let-down, but you can work through it best by bringing to your new opportunities the same degree of respect and enthusiasm you brought to your activities overseas.

MARKETING YOURSELF

Here are some tips for highlighting your international experience for potential employers and program heads:

On your résumé:

- Highlight the extra responsibilities and volunteer work you took on; mention any extra difficulties you had to overcome which someone in the same work in Canada would not have to worry about.
- Mention any preparation courses, orientations, professional development courses, seminars, workshops, conferences you participated in. Did you give or organize any workshops, seminars, conferences?
- Highlight any languages or specialized skills you picked up.
- Highlight the generic skills crucial to success overseas: cross-cultural communications; tact, diplomacy, cultural sensitivity; motivation, energy, initiative; stress management; people skills; ability to work alone or in a team; maturity, judgement, ability to learn.

In the interview:

- Mention all the above that you have added to your résumé, and *be tenacious*. Don't let them change the topic, or dismiss your experiences too quickly. Come armed with specific examples to back up all your points. You might be facing a problem of communications: *you* know how valuable your experience was, but *they* don't. Stay confident. Educate them. The experiences you have had will be valuable to your future employers; they just might not realize it yet!

WHO IN THE WORLD WILL HIRE ME?

Here's a list of some of the types of organizations that might be interested in your international experience:

- *Non-governmental organizations involved in international development, and consulting firms which deal with international issues and information.* This is the Age of Information, and you have first-hand experience in a specific area. These types of organizations are especially interested in people with language, management, and fundraising expertise, to complement their international experience.
- *Multinational corporations; international businesses; private businesses that have dealings overseas.* Languages, firsthand experience, and contacts are important to these groups.
- *Embassies and consulates.* Again, language ability, firsthand experience, and any relevant skills you can add are important to them. They also often hire private English or French teachers for their staff and families.
- *Ethnic community liaison groups.* They sometimes are looking for people who can provide cultural bridges. Language, experience, cross-cultural communications are all important.
- *International offices for schools, colleges and universities.* They need people to provide support services for international students, and generally they hire those with international experience.

