

Know Before You Go

BY DAVID P. SAIA

“See the world!” Excellent advice, always. So you have seen some of the world, and you want more.

You’ve been the straight-out-of-college kid backpacking through Europe, Asia, Latin America, or Africa, and now you’re seriously considering making the leap from casual wanderer to expatriate worker. I’ve used both approaches in my travels and would like to offer some observations on how the two experiences differ.

I am a U.S. native who has worked mostly in Taiwan since August 2002 and as a technical writer here since October 2004. Before starting work at Trend Micro, Inc. (Taiwan), I worked here as an English-language curriculum writer and as a “native-speaking English teacher.” Ten years ago, I traveled throughout Southeast Asia, not as a worker but as

a wanderer, cultural observer, and amateur travel writer. I’ve found that there are huge differences between getting international experience by working as an expat and getting such experience by traveling for fun.

What Are Your Goals?

Before making such a serious leap, it’s important to be clear about your goals. As a backpacking wanderer, my goals were simple: see as much of the world as I could before my money ran out. Having few or no goals is very suitable for the casual traveler, but if you’re going to put your career and income on the line, it pays to give these questions serious consideration: How long are you prepared to live abroad? Why do you want to?

In addition to having traveled on my own, I’ve known many expats from different walks of life and with different goals. Here are some goals that are clear

enough to help you “keep your eye on the prize”:

- To save up x amount of money; then it’s back home
- To earn money abroad so that I can continue traveling for as long as possible
- To gain valuable international experience in the field of x , so that I can return to my country and further my career in that field
- To work abroad for x years... or until my industry in the home country recovers from its terrible slump
- To greatly improve my language skills in x language by using it every day with native speakers
- For some inexplicable reason, I am totally gaga over women/men from x country, and I want to marry one!

In my case, my goal was simple: To once again have sustainable employment! (As a refugee from the dot-com bust, I found that my best employment opportunities were abroad.)

Before You Leave

Do you have important obligations at home that could snatch you back on short notice? I’ve both experienced and witnessed others having to repatriate to the home country on short notice to help parents with end-of-life care. Dealing with long-term illness or the death of a parent is traumatic even when you are living in the same country.

Do you have a house, car, or other property at home that will need to be rented out or sold? Where will you store your belongings? Keeping access to your U.S. bank account is a very smart idea. You need to have a U.S. address (at least, on paper) in order to do this. So if you don’t have a friend whose address you can “borrow,” it may be worth it to rent a temporary P.O. box and provide it to your bank as your new address. One advantage of renting a mailbox is that you can have a mail services company forward your mail to you abroad, even as that address changes, for a small fee.

Where Do You Want to Live?

Of course, choosing a locale is one of the biggest decisions of all. As a back-

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packer, you might be fine just to choose a region (or a continent!). As an expat, you'll have to settle on an individual city. Choose carefully. It is a tremendous help if you've already spent some time in the city—or at least in the country—where you are planning to work. I know little about Europe, having traveled only in the U.K., but I do know from my weeks there and in the handful of countries I traveled through in Southeast Asia that there is a huge difference between living in the “developing world” and the “developed world.”

The Developed World

Plainly stated, if you're fluent or conversational in French, German, Japanese, Dutch, or any of the major languages spoken in the G-10 countries, and if you're squeamish about not being able to drink water from the tap or about any of the many other lifestyle adjustments you may have to make in a developing country, perhaps you'd be happier working in a developed country. The big questions are these: Do you have the skills to be employed there? Can you afford to live there? Lots of people would like to live in richer countries, and the workforce in such countries is typically highly educated, so competition for jobs can be extreme, especially if you're coming from outside.

The Developing World

On the other hand, if you're drawn to the romance of working in a far-flung, “exotic” place and if you have no problem using squat toilets, accommodating your eating habits to avoid food-borne illnesses, and/or living in tropical heat, the developing world may be for you. One big advantage of working in some developing countries is that the demand for your skills is likely to be much stronger than in developed countries.

Language

Going to a non-English-speaking country to visit is a whole different ballgame from going there to live and work. Matching your language skills to the location can easily make the difference between a happy life and a frustrating life. Remember that most of your wak-

ing hours will be spent...*working*. Take with a huge grain of salt any employer's statement that they will help you to learn the local language. Think about it: Their aim is to make the best use of your skills, not to invest time and resources in teaching you a language. Do not count on any such promises. When it comes to language, you're best off thinking of it as something that you will need to acquire completely on your own—ideally, before entering the country.

Be prepared to invest much more time to get up to a conversational level if (1) your target language is tonal, such as Chinese, Vietnamese, or Thai, and you have not studied a tonal language before or (2) your target language does not have a phonetic alphabet.

Contracts and Visa Issues

The easiest way to relocate internationally is of course with the help of your new company. And the easiest way to get that help is to get the job before you get on a plane. The Internet is an excellent source for international job opportunities. If you've lived in your target country before, you may already know where to look online for employment. I found the job posting for my current position in the online version of a local English-language newspaper, the *Taipei Times*, and interviewed for the job by phone and in person (within my state of residence, since luckily my company has offices in my state). The fact that I had lived and worked in Taiwan before was a big selling point to my hiring manager, as you would expect.

A company large enough to sponsor a foreigner for a work visa is likely to handle all of the paperwork for you.

Working as a Technical Writer in Taiwan

The major hardware “science park” in Taiwan is in the city of Hsinchu, about an hour's drive from Taipei. Within the walls of this government-supported

high-tech industrial zone, the streets are wide and clean and the lawns, green and neatly clipped. If you didn't know better, you could easily mistake it for any town in Silicon Valley.

The big software science park is in a newly developing area of Taipei called Neihu. I worked there part-time as a technical writer, during which time my employer moved from Taipei City to its brand-new building in Neihu. Neihu is a bit far from downtown Taipei, but that's where a lot of the tech jobs are, and it's kind of interesting watching the skyline evolve, as new construction is constant.

I was very lucky in that I found a job not off in faraway Hsinchu or even Neihu but in downtown Taipei, working for Taiwan's most successful brand, Trend Micro, which is one of the big three network security/antivirus firms worldwide. The work is challenging, rewarding, and intellectually stimulating, and I get to look out of my window every day and see the world's tallest building (Taipei 101)! As mentioned above, knowledge of the local language is a big plus, but for most of my tasks as a technical writer producing English documentation, I can get by using my native tongue. I have studied Mandarin, however, and will continue this study. The job at Trend Micro is great for me because it requires the creation of new documentation, the use of the latest technical writing tools, and a deep understanding of our software products; in some other companies, positions called “technical writer” really amount to English-language editor/proofreader of documents drafted by engineers for whom English is a foreign language.

My travels ten years ago were a great adventure, but perhaps the biggest difference between that stint and my current one is that, whereas before I was spending lots of cash for the privilege of seeing the world, now I'm earning and saving it while getting my overseas experience. ❶

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