

## Feelings of an ExPat

The first time someone called me an expat it sounded like a dirty name, like I was an exiled patriot. That does not describe me or any expats I know. Let's make it clear: an expat is a person who chooses to live or work outside of her or his native country for any number of reasons. Is life as an expat with someone to cook and clean for me, a gardener, and a night watchman easy for me? Yes and no.

I say yes because I enjoy having someone to take care of me. I live in Lome, Togo, about six degrees north of the Equator. I love living less than a half mile from the ocean and having the sound of the waves lapping on the beach lull me to sleep at night. For me, the tropical climate and humidity is great (I don't like cold weather); add to all of this the gentility of the Togolese people which gives me a warm and very comfortable feeling. The rhythm and speed of life in Togo is much slower, too, than in the States and more to my liking. There are many more reasons that I could give you for why I enjoy life in Togo, so, what is the part about life as an expat that is not comfortable for me?

It's not so much the physical aspect of not living in the States with its many conveniences (and inconveniences) that sometimes colors a sunny day cloudy. It's the emotional tugs that sometimes get to me. I have been fortunate to have lived on four different continents in my life—North America, Asia, Europe and now Africa. Some feelings have never changed for me when I lived away from the States. I remember when I lived in Japan as a child and I missed my cousins and birthday parties and Christmas and my grandparents. I have family and friends in the States now and I have the same feelings sometimes of missing out on things—birthdays (I like opening and seeing people open presents) and holidays and family trips and hanging out with friends and jokes that you have to be there to share and understand. I miss those times. I have missed out on births of babies in my family and deaths during times I have been an expat in different parts of the world. I've had to learn to cope with loss at a young age only with the help of my parents. As I said, it's the emotional tugs that sometimes get to me, and yet I choose to live in Africa to fulfill other needs that I have.

What have been the tender spots for other people? Other expats have shared more feelings: the differences in cultures are sometimes hard to understand or cope with; they don't like the weather; they have a hard time with the language (the official language in Togo and Benin is French, in Ghana the language is English and there are many local languages and dialects, too). Expat staff members sometimes transfer to new countries or regions in the same countries for advancement in the corporation but these same changes may bring requirements that are overwhelming, especially for the family member who does not have anything to fill the time. The resulting stress has led to "extended vacations" where the family goes back home for a while, even up to a year where there are no school-aged children, because the newly promoted staff member has less time for the family. "Extended vacations" can result in other stresses and tensions upon the return of the family. For those expats that stay, they develop their own expat family connections as a support system to help them cope. Deep friendships develop but when part of the family leaves, for whatever reason, they take a certain feeling of security with them and their friends that remain may feel a certain emptiness. Fears and uncertainties about political atmospheres in Africa abound. I've talked with expat refugees that were evacuated to one country only to have to be evacuated to a second country. Even when counselors are not working, people like to share their feelings with us, so I've heard the good, the bad, and the just plain homesick.

Does any of this sound familiar to you? Share your feelings about being an expat. Send me a message at [expats@counselorinafrica.com](mailto:expats@counselorinafrica.com). I'll change your identity and your country so you won't be recognized and will share as many letters as possible in this space. It helps to know that you're not alone. This is a recent anonymous message sent to this forum: Expat counselor, I just need to say this! I'M SCARED!! I don't want to lose my job here in Africa, it pays better than any I've had, and it will help me advance when I go back to the States, but I'm Scared! When I read what's happening in the news here in Nigeria and I listen to the rumors from people around me, I'm Scared. I don't know if I could survive being kidnapped. I'm too young to die. I hope you get the message: I'M SCARED!