

Always beginning again

By Alison Langley

Published: November 3 2006 15:02 | Last updated: November 3 2006 15:02

Kristin Fougner knows all about the highs and lows of sharing her life with a globetrotting businessman. A native of Norway with an advanced degree from Bergen's Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration, she has spent the past 15 years following her husband on four foreign assignments.

This means she has discovered exotic cultures, learnt new languages, befriended people she never would have met as a tourist and become more flexible and more global in her outlook. But all these opportunities have come at a cost.

With each move, Fougner has had to start over again, finding new houses and turning them into homes, helping her two sons adjust to new schools, and, perhaps most importantly, establishing a professional life for herself in each city. "From a career point of view, it is a very big challenge," she says. "You have to sell yourself to new employers all the time. When you're not working, you are seen as lazy. And when you are working but not making a career, you are looked upon as a failure."

Although reliable data are hard to find, there are hundreds of thousands of people just like Fougner, who every few years follow their partners to new assignments in destinations from London to Mumbai, New York to Shanghai. But today's trailing spouses are different from those who came before. First, there are many more of them. In the past, trailing spouse were typically stay-at-home wives of diplomats or military men. Nowadays, thanks to globalisation, more companies expect their employees to move regardless of whether they are married or have children. Many have partners who are highly educated and have important jobs of their own. Data from GMAC Global Relocation Services show that 81 per cent of employees sent overseas bring their significant others and 60 per cent of the latter have serious careers they want to maintain.

"It's a big issue," says Robin Pascoe, a Canadian whose Foreign Service husband took her to four countries in 15 years. She has written five books on expatriate living and argues that having a job is a big part of being settled in a new place. "We live in a society where people are identified by what they do, not who they are."

Yvonne McNulty, an Australian-born researcher who followed her husband to the US and Singapore, studied the problem as part of her masters degree thesis, surveying 264 trailing spouses. Most were like her: a woman under 40 with children and at least a university degree. In McNulty's survey, the only known study of the trailing spouse, nearly 80 per cent of respondents had left careers to follow their partners abroad but only 36 per cent said they could continue working.

"Those statistics tell you there are barriers to mobility and why some people don't take on foreign assignments," McNulty says. Half of those she surveyed said the biggest shock was their reduced independence. An expatriate salary – which typically includes housing allowance, private school fees and occasionally household help – can make up for the loss of a second income. But it does not prepare career-minded trailers for the change in lifestyle or the shift in their family's balance of power. "I don't know a single expat who didn't say they weren't challenged to rethink who they were, what they stood for," McNulty says.

GMAC reports that the number of spouses who leave an assignment early is increasing and that 7 per cent of foreign assignments failed last year, mainly because of spousal dissatisfaction. More alarmingly, experts say that expatriate marriages are more likely than others to fail and that non-working partners on foreign assignments are more likely to turn to substance abuse.

That's not to say there aren't significant benefits to the trailing spouse lifestyle.

MORE REVIEWS

[March of the haute bourg](#)
['What I love is the quirkin](#)
[Seeking the natural alter](#)
[Mapping out a recovery](#)
[Langeudoc's à la carte at](#)
[Keeping up with the Jobs](#)
[Surface attention](#)
[Bacon among delinquent](#)
[Spectral speculation](#)
[A satellite becomes a sta](#)

Some happily take time off from working, viewing it as an opportunity for a three- or five-year break in which they might study for a degree or spend time with their children. Younger people might see the assignment as a natural time to have babies.

In the beginning, few relocaters have time to think. Tasks include selling the old home and finding the right new house – “it’s the wife who notices if the stairs are too steep or if the plugs need child-proofing,” Pascoe says – waiting for the furniture shipment to arrive, buying curtains, rugs and even appliances if the electrical currents vary from those in a home country.

Wilma van der Veer, president of GRS Relocation Services, says many relocated families, especially those from the US, are shocked at how small their new spaces are compared with those in their home country. Flats furnished to a different standard or style than expected can also cause consternation. “Don’t compare the new location with home,” she advises. “You need to experience the new place for what it is.”

If children are involved, schools must also be found and fears about transition allayed. For many trailing spouses, official entertaining also becomes an enormous, often new, part of their lives. Suddenly they must prepare and host a dinner for 12 at a time when they are still learning the local word for milk.

Some parts of the moving process are exciting. Most expatriate partners delight in exploring local shops and bringing their finds back home. Anyone who has lived even a short while in Asia, for example, has a Buddha or two decorating a living room. Matrouska dolls and ikons find their way into the homes of families who have lived in Moscow, while the tell-tale sign of a stay in Switzerland is a cow bell. “Every place we went to, I would pack on a water bottle and walk and walk and walk, and [now] we have a living room that says: ‘We lived in Asia’,” Pascoe says. She treasures wicker screens purchased in Bangkok in 1982 but confesses to owning far too much traditional Thai blue-and-white china.

Fougner, meanwhile, collects art and the walls of her home are teeming with works from around the world.

Still, as time goes on, the novelty wears off and long-term challenges emerge. American Norm Boyd, who has followed his wife to assignments in Australia, Japan and Germany, jokes that he is a “stud” (spouse trailing under duress) but he’s actually one of the lucky ones. As an information technology specialist for Hewlett-Packard, he has had no problem finding work or transferring when his wife moves. “What I do, I can do anywhere,” he says.

More commonly, however, trailing spouses find themselves blocked from jobs because they don’t have the necessary work permits, language skills or their résumés don’t translate well. Women might find they aren’t even welcome in the workforce culture of their host country. “Most trailing spouses now have careers but most governments don’t realise this yet,” van der Veer says. “It’s a hot topic.”

Jessica Radermacher, a US lawyer, followed her husband to Germany, thinking she would be “Miss International Lawyer”. But “I really underestimated the culture shock and language barrier,” she says. In the end, lacking local connections and fluent German, she used the time off to have two children. After the family moved to Switzerland, she was ready to go back to the office but had to spend five years coaxing Swiss authorities into giving her a work permit. She now has a private practice in Zurich.

McNulty wasn’t able to secure a work permit during the six years she lived in the US, so she got creative, working out a deal with a local college to lecture two seminars per semester in return for tuition to finish her postgraduate work.

Fougner did not speak Czech when she moved to Prague, nor did she have a work permit, but she managed to establish herself as a consultant and landed a contract with a French bank. In Zurich, where she didn’t have child support, she initially decided to take a break from work and help her children adjust to their new home but she now works as a credit administrator for a Dutch bank.

Candice Hughes, an American, agreed to move with her husband and their two toddlers to Canada, then Switzerland, then Germany in the late 1980s while she was completing her PhD thesis. Her epiphany about how to live life abroad came in 1989 when she accompanied her husband, Louis – then chief executive officer of Adam Opel, the carmaker – to the Frankfurt Auto Show. A gaggle of photographers and journalists met their car kerbside and her

husband was whisked away to a press conference. Hughes was stranded for 20 minutes. "I'm standing all alone, feeling vulnerable – and angry," she recalls.

She realised that she wouldn't be comfortable trailing her husband on assignment unless she was working. When she was finally able to leave the auto show, she drove straight to her children's international school. "I told them: 'I want a job. I will wash windows but I want a job.' At the time I hadn't worked for four years. I was fearful of losing my skills as a psychologist but I knew I didn't want to be Mrs Adam Opel any more."

Trailing spouses often go through the same stages of grief as someone who has lost a loved one. "They are grieving a loss of career. They go through shock, denial, anger. A lot of women get stuck in anger and don't get to the reconciliation stage," Pascoe says. "Those are the women I refuse to play tennis with." They hit the ball too hard. Or they become über-homemakers and über-mums.

Though she jokes about it, Pascoe and others say corporate human resources departments would do well to notice and help trailing spouses. "The unhappy ones are phoning their husbands 20 times a day – that's not an exaggeration – and the husband is not productive under those circumstances [but] HR doesn't deal with that," Pascoe says. "Meanwhile the guy is burning out."

Companies can help by including partners in the moving process, providing language training and cultural awareness seminars that might include instruction on how to do business in the host country. Most spouses also need help polishing résumés for an international audience and getting work permits. But, says Gill Aldred, a British citizen who trailed her husband to the US, where she could work, and Nigeria, where she could not, "companies have a natural reluctance to get involved with the private lives of their employees".

Assignment success, McNulty concludes, depends on how well expatriate spouses can strike a balance between missed opportunities in their home country and new prospects in their host country.

Jane Ulewicz, a registered nurse from the US living in Singapore, says she has enjoyed taking time off to spend with her daughter. "I wouldn't change it for anything in the world," she says. Still, she is leaving the island state early to go back to her native Georgia because she doesn't want to lose her competitive work advantage. "With one year out, you lose knowledge and skills. The equipment is constantly changing. I don't want to get too far behind by being here."

Fougner, meanwhile, says she is happy to remain a trailing spouse, provided she continues to find the right houses for her family and jobs for herself. "It will change your life," she says.

It certainly did for Hughes. When she moved back to the US, she turned her experience into a job. She now researches cultural transitions for Bridging Cultures, a company she founded with friends made in Switzerland.

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2006

[Print article](#) [Email article](#) [Order reprints](#)

TRACK THIS STORY

News alerts

Email - create a keyword alert on the subject of this topic

[Go](#)

Desktop - download our application to receive instant alerts on this topic

[Go](#)

Email summaries

Email - start your day with daily email briefing on this topic

[Go](#)

RSS feeds

RSS - Track this news topic using our feeds

[Go](#)

SPONSORED LINKS

[How to advertise here](#)

Buy Books from audible.co.uk

Download digital audio books to your PC, iPod or MP3 player. Free iPod Shuffle for new subscribers and access to over 8,000 audiobooks. Up to 80% off retail prices.

Amazon UK - Books, Audio, Video and More

Shop at amazon.co.uk for books, videos, music, games, toys and electrical items at up

to 50% off. Now offering free delivery on orders over £19. Affiliate.

Online Book Stores - Coupons and Deals

Shop from UK's best online book stores at 247malls and find free valuable coupons and special deals. Affiliate site.

[Sport](#)
[Luxury holiday](#)

[Art](#)
[Fashion and beauty](#)

[Home and garden](#)
[Fashion accessories](#)

[FT Home](#)

[Site map](#) [Contact us](#)

[Press enquiries](#) [Student offers](#) [FT Conferences](#) [FT Research Centre](#) [Corporate subscriptions](#) [FT Group](#)

Partner sites: [Chinese FT.com](#) [Les Echos](#) [FT Deutschland](#) [Expansion](#)

© Copyright [The Financial Times Ltd](#) 2006. "FT" and "Financial Times" are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd. [Privacy policy](#) [Terms](#)