

A life in limbo



Expat life can be experienced in one of two places: in a bubble, or in reality. For some, learning the local language bursts the bubble; for others, a trip to the unemployment office might do the trick. For Chantal, it took becoming a “permanent” resident of Switzerland to realise that her expat life – her strange existence between time and space – was actually her real life, after all.

By Chantal Panozzo | Today is my first official day as a permanent resident of Switzerland. Almost five years after my arrival here, I've sent in the paperwork for my C-permit. And although I'm still waiting for the new documents, I do have something else to show for my new life: Swiss health insurance. Today marks the first day my husband is no longer on an expatriate contract at work. This means no more international health insurance, no more annual free flights back to the United States, no more housing allowances, and no more guarantees of returning to the States on the company's dime. But it also means something else: no more living in limbo.

The pros and cons of expat life

I admit that the past five years in Switzerland have been wonderful and that my husband's company was very supportive of our time here. So why would we stay, once this support is taken away? It's true; many expats would go back home or take another posting abroad, before they would risk parting with all the financial and emotional support that an international company provides on overseas postings. Plus, expat life can be addictive: there's the money and lifestyle; there's the excitement of being in a new place; there's the elevated status. But there can also be the identity crisis.

So how does it feel now, living in Switzerland without the security of an expat contract? In short, it feels great – and for any number of reasons.

The life of an expat is one of uncertainty. Everything you once took for granted – like where you're from, where you call home and who you are – gets called into question. You start putting things off for “later”, when you'll be living a normal life again. There were many times during the last five years when my husband and I said things like, “we'll get a dog when we move back”. Or, “you can get a piano when we have a house”. Or, “we'll have a baby when we're living near family again”.

If. What. Where. When. These were the words that consumed our lives.

Sometimes as an expat, instead of living your life, you find you're constantly putting it off: living a strange existence between reality and fantasy, as if you are somehow lost in space and time, waiting for this existence to turn into something resembling real life.

It's true that living in such a bubble is not without advantages. In a bubble, everything counts on your perception, rather than on reality. This can be a mixed blessing, depending on your imagination: you can imagine your boss likes you; that your neighbour loves your new wind chime, or you can imagine you'll easily become fluent in German. But at some point, if you stay in a foreign country beyond the expiry of your expat contract, your bubble will burst. And while reality can be hard, it can also be liberating.

Life on the edge

My bubble began forming when my husband and I arrived in Switzerland in June 2006 on a three-year expat contract. But two and a half years in, we were faced with a decision: his company would extend his contract for a year if we wanted to stay. So we did.

Then, the next year, the same thing happened again. His company extended the contract for a year and we accepted. Every six months, we'd be making this decision again, never knowing where we'd be the following year. To say this kind of life was stressful is an understatement.

It also caused my bubble to keep growing. For a long time, I'd put off finding another job since there was just no point if we were going to be leaving the country in a few months. For a while, I travelled the European continent like a madwoman, running all over, “just in case” this would be my last year in Europe. For a while, I ignored the German language because “why bother if I was just leaving the country soon?” I was the world's champion procrastinator. But the only person I was letting down was myself.

Fresh eyes

Now that our stay in Switzerland no longer has an expiration date, my strange existence, the bubble I was living in, is finally broken. And looking back, I can see that five years have passed since I last noticed I was living my life. So although I'll miss the financial support and security of an expat contract, in a way, it's a relief to say goodbye to the life it brought with it. Because even though I moved to Switzerland five years ago, today I'm finally really living here.