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At Home Abroad

Lessons learned from a year of expat mishaps

International Herald Tribune

If experience is the best teacher, then starting a new life abroad is back-to-school time. As the new year begins, we asked the *At Home Abroad* correspondents for examples of lessons learned, based on their own experience or that of their sources. What follows is a sampling; others will appear throughout the year. Happy 2006!

■ Work the phones

When my husband and I announced that we were moving to London, the phone numbers of every person with an English address our friends and relatives had ever met were slipped in our pockets with firm instructions to call the moment we landed.

I just couldn't do it. I could not imagine having a phone conversation that began, "You don't know me, but your mom's friend is friends with my mom's friend from their sorority days back in Chicago." It seemed so diluted and desperate — too close to the way I was feeling as a new expatriate.

A year later, I met one of the numbers at a party and we hit it off instantly. As our friendship grew, I mourned the fact that I had not phoned her earlier. Her sense of humor and local knowledge would have made my early expat days so much easier and less lonely.

On subsequent moves, to Brussels and Paris, I guarded the names, numbers and, later, e-mail addresses of these future contacts like guest passes to a private club. One Brussels number is now a godparent to one of my children. Another is the non-family emergency contact on all my kids' school forms.

So when the phone rang recently and a new voice said, "Hi, you don't know me but 17 years ago my husband's colleague used to work with you in New York," I cut her off and said, "How soon can you meet me for a coffee?" You just never know.

— Jennifer Conlin

■ Dare to be different

In its coverage of the 1964 Summer Olympics, National Geographic magazine introduced the world to the sight of "packers" squeezing hapless commuters onto Tokyo trains like sardines. Foreigners gained direct experience of this in the 1980s, as the

booming economy drew multinational companies and banks to Japan.

But as much as expats may want to adopt local customs, in this case that may be ill-advised. "Japan's group mentality leads people to travel in predictable waves," said John Harris, a longtime resident who lives in Chiba, near Tokyo. "So the secret of a happy, stress-free life in Japan is to do everything 'wrong.'"

That includes traveling to work at 6 a.m., as many expats do, before the morning rush hour begins at 7 a.m. It also means avoiding the evening rush hour, which starts around 6 p.m., dies down by 8 p.m. and re-emerges around 11 p.m. when late-night workers and night-time drinkers try to catch their last trains home.

Even leisure travel is subject to rush hours. Many Tokyo residents leave Hakone, a weekend day-trip destination, at 4 p.m. for the return to the city. "All you need to do," Harris said, "is wait until 7 p.m."

— Miki Tanikawa

■ No wheels are worth it

When Suzanne, an economist, and her husband, Bill, left the Boston suburbs for her new job in Paris in the 1990s, they decided to take their car: a roomy, four-door 1987 Toyota Camry. Bill, a photographer, envisioned cruising the French countryside with his cameras, accompanied by his faithful golden retriever.

What they had not envisioned was the lengthy process of converting the car to local technical standards while negotiating a Catch-22 of registration requirements. French rules require temporary use of the home license plates until a foreign car passes its technical test, said Suzanne, who withheld her real name so she would not jinx a current citizenship application. But Massachusetts bars use of its plates and registration abroad, she learned. They used the plates anyway, but worries over insurance coverage infused their drives with anxiety.

Meanwhile, they hired an agent to handle the technical upgrade. Most ad-

justments were small — a brake light below the rear window removed, the seat belts relocated — but they cost over \$1,000. The last straw: The car, not big by American standards, was difficult to park on Paris streets. Suzanne and Bill ended up using it only rarely and decided to ship it back home. Altogether, they spent \$5,600, including shipping, insurance and parking.

Lesson learned: Think twice before bringing your car, even if you are not paying for it yourself. "You don't want a car in a big city," Suzanne said, "and if you do want a car, you want a local car."

— Sharon Reier



Meritxell Duran

few words of Chinese, could not say, "I can do it myself, thanks."

Just 15 minutes a day studying the language of the country where you are living or visiting can make all the difference in dealing with uncomfortable situations. If you're in China, a forceful "No, thanks," can halt unwelcome solicitations and street peddlers. Pleading ignorance with "I don't understand" can get you out of nearly any jam and even help with meeting new friends, making knowing how to say "My name is..." a linguistic necessity.

When shopping, learn to say "How much?" (Duoshao qian?) and "Too expensive" (Tai gui le) and you will gain respect as a seasoned haggler. In fact, always say "tai gui le" at least twice when haggling, even if you don't have the numbers down, and try walking away once. Sometimes body language is as effective as words in getting results.

— R. Scott Macintosh

■ Rules can be broken

Fifteen years ago my husband and I moved to Africa and, despite the fact that I was 30 years old, I regressed into a helpless child. I just could not figure out the rules with certain people. Especially with Francis.

Francis (not his real name) was our "houseman." He had been hired several residents ago and came with the house. A tall, loose-limbed man with a pouting face, he was wary of me from the start. Our first run-in was over the sugar. One day I was checking the larder and casually mentioned that I thought we had more sugar. Francis ran from the room and I found him in the kitchen, tears streaming down his face. Madam had accused him of stealing! It took copious soothing words from my husband to calm him down.

In the months and years ahead a variety of small items — radios, watches and so on — disappeared from the house. We did nothing, afraid of making false accusations, afraid of more tears, thinking that whoever had taken these things probably needed them more than we did, thinking that

the protocol in Africa is different.

Francis lived with us for five unpleasant years, and we thought we had no choice but to put up with the unpleasantness. In hindsight, I see that Francis and I simply didn't like each other from the first — a common condition between two people that sometimes has no remedy. And when I first suspected Francis of theft, I should have broken the "rules" and let him go — with hefty severance pay and a letter of recommendation, of course. How much better for everyone if I had.

— Gretchen Lang

■ Some things just don't travel

When my family lived in Berlin, we had a Turkish friend, an antique seller who specialized in estate liquidations. One day he called me to say, "I've found it."

"Found what?" I asked.

"Your piano."

An hour later, Ilky arrived with a 1920s instrument the color of light chocolate, with brass candlesticks to light the sheet music and a cameo of Beethoven above the word "Leipzig." My daughter was learning to play "Ode to Joy," and this was just the sort of inspiration I was looking for. The piano needed tuning; even I knew that. But it soon became our centerpiece.

A year later, we were packing for a posting to Moscow. We gave away our pet rabbit, figuring it would not survive the move. But it never occurred to me that we should not take the piano — that its sensitive innards were even less resilient than the bunny's. (A similar jostling effect can harm sophisticated coffee machines, too.)

Our Russian piano tuner comes every six months to tinker with the capricious keys. To my ears it sounds lovely, especially when my daughter plays Tchaikovsky in our Soviet-era apartment. But the long-term prognosis is grim. "It's finished," the tuner said, shaking his head. "You could easily have found a piano like this anywhere in Moscow," he added. "There was no need to bring it from Berlin."

I now see that everybody else seems to know this about moving pianos. Expats saddled with large, pristine, more prestigious instruments than mine have tried to unload their beasts on me. I tell them that I have my own headache already. Besides, after all this, how can we ever part?

— Nora FitzGerald

GlobeShopper

A merry time for bargain-hunters

By Maisie Wilhelm

PARIS Pine needles are turning brown and dieting has begun, which means the post-Christmas shopping season is upon us. In many corners of the world, the time to find a great bargain is now.

If retailers were worried by lagging sales leading up to Christmas, they can now devote their energies to the post-holiday sale season, when many people wait to shop and take advantage of steep discounts.

In London, major department stores like Selfridges and Harvey Nichols opened their doors for sales the day after Christmas. Harrods followed closely with its massive winter sale, which started on Wednesday and lasts until Jan. 28. This year, 250,000 people came on the first day.

The Harrods sale is popular because of the numerous luxury brands discounted up to 70 percent. One strategy for finding the best deals is to stake out the merchandise ahead of time.

"There are many seasoned hard-core shoppers who have been going to the sales every year and like to queue up from 3 in the morning onwards," a Har-

rods spokesperson said. "These are people who have come just before the sale, gone round the store, seen what they want and know where to find it."

These eager shoppers join the stampede on the first day but do not need to waste time browsing and trying on items, instead proceeding directly to the cashier.

In France and Italy, the winter and summer sale periods are regulated by the local government. The two annual sale periods, in January and mid-July, are limited by law to six weeks (eight in Italy), and the start date is set

following a recommendation of the Minister of Finance. The sales can end at any time but must not exceed the time limit set by law. Retailers find this advantageous because consumers buy quickly, lest the sale end suddenly.

The purpose of the sale periods is to "favor the rapid elimination of the stock," said Françoise Lebé of the Ministry of Economy, Finance and Industry.

Stores can offer discounts, or "promotions," outside the two official periods. These promotions differ from the sales in that they are unrestricted in length and must advertise an end date, which lessens the pressure on consumers to buy quickly before the dis-

counts surprisingly end. During these promotions, the goods must also be supplied at the advertised price even if the store is out of stock and needs to order it. But few consumers realize that they can take advantage of this, Lebé said.

Shopping in early January is popular because of these discounts. But the frenzy that attends the search for bargains on top designer goods is common outside the major department stores of Europe. Large shopping festivals are beginning to spring up and attract visitors to shopping destinations considered perhaps less traditional.

Cannes, the French city that attracts glitterati each year for its film festival, will play host to the third Cannes Shopping Festival this winter from Jan. 5 to Jan. 15. The festival, with discounts at 300 stores, also features gala events, exhibitions of vintage cars, live demonstrations by young designers creating outfits, and ready-to-wear fashion shows from Salvatore Ferragamo, Valentino and others. The shows are held in the film festival's famous screening room.

In the United Arab Emirates, the city government of Dubai has set a minimum discount of 25 percent for the stores participating in the Dubai Shopping Festival, from Jan. 4 to Feb. 4. Shoppers will also have the chance to win prizes like new cars.

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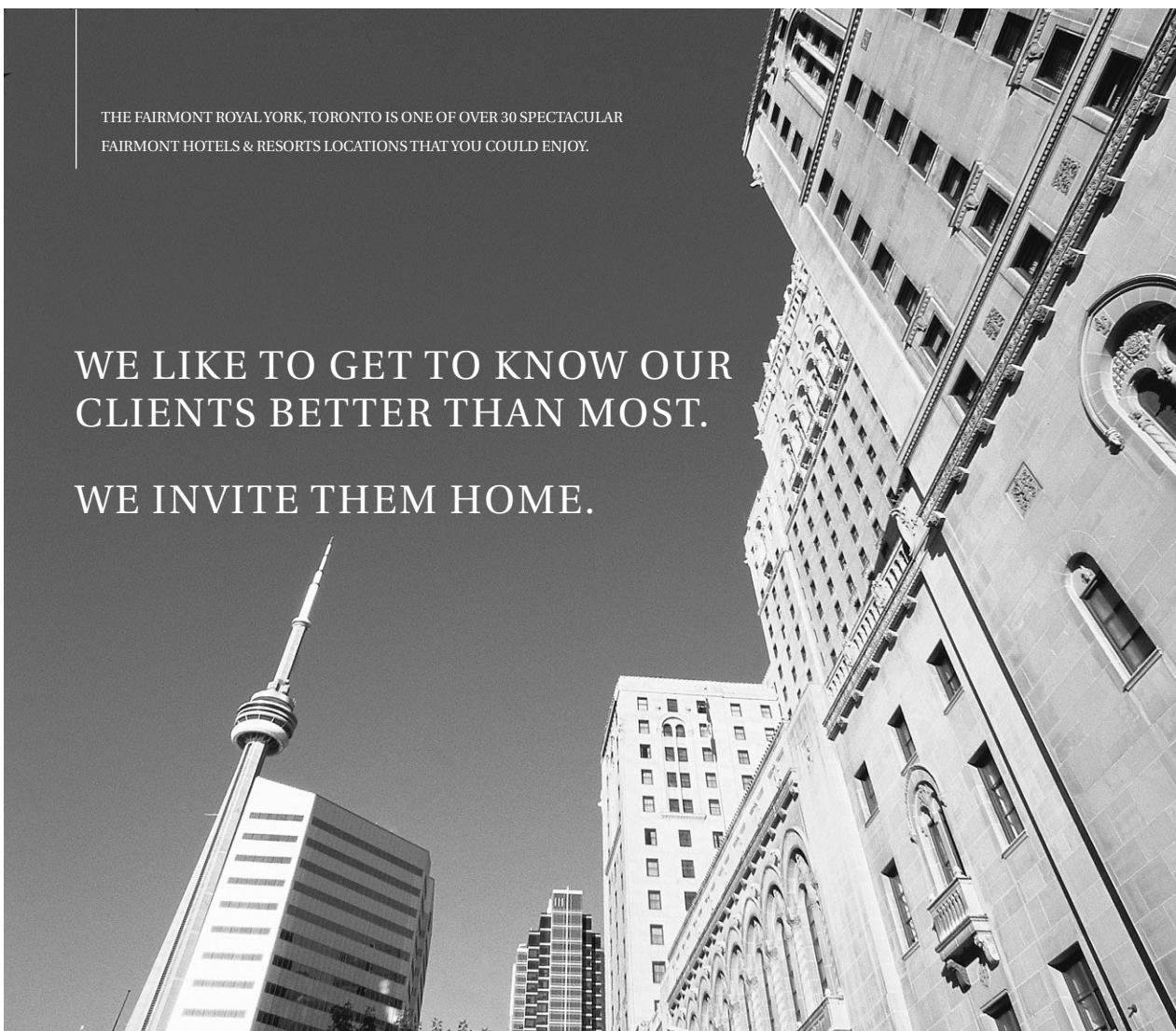


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