

# **Unpack**

A Guide to Life as  
an Expat Spouse

by Lana Wimmer and Tanya Arler

*Unpack: A Guide to Life as an Expat Spouse*

Co-Authored by Lana Wimmer and Tanya Arler

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Dedicated to the countless expat spouses who have gone before us to pave the way, and to the countless who will follow.

# Acknowledgements

If not for our expat journey – and one another – this book never would have been written. *Unpack: A Guide to Life as an Expat Spouse* represents a true amalgamation of our hearts and minds. Expat friends rock!

We also couldn't have done it without the support of the most important people in our lives: our husbands and children. They inspired us throughout our expat journey and were our biggest supporters, cheering us on and celebrating our smallest of "wins" when we overcame obstacles. Without them, let's be honest, we wouldn't even be here. So for that, they get a big thank you and a home cooked dinner.

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# Preface

So here you are. Your husband's work is moving the whole family to a new country and the thought of packing up your home and transporting you and your kids into a whole new world is exciting and anxiety-provoking at the same time.

You're worried about the kids and the logistics of it all, not to mention wondering what life will be like once you get there. If you've never done anything like this before it can feel daunting.

Wouldn't it be great if you could wave a magic wand and someone would appear who could tell you what to expect and how to handle the inevitable twists and turns that lie on the road ahead?

Well, ta-da, this is your magic wand. *Sort of*. Only we won't appear in person while you sit there in your jammies reading. (That might be scary for all of us.) But you'll feel like we're right there with you, as you read the dilemmas and advice we'll be sharing in *Unpack: A Guide to Life as an Expat Spouse* to help you navigate your expat journey.

We wrote this book because we know what you need most is something you can read on the go or when the going gets tough – a book with straightforward answers. Expat life is busy and overwhelming in the beginning, so we've designed *Unpack: A Guide to Life as an Expat Spouse* to be read cover to cover or to pick up any time for some quick inspiration.

How do we know? Because between the two of us we've made fifteen international moves spanning three continents. That's a lot of schlepping around! And through it all we've learned invaluable universal lessons and will share advice that will help you, regardless of where your new home is in the world.

With this simple, practical advice you can avoid common expat mishaps and get right into enjoying the adventure. We'll help you with things such as... how to build a support system, find the best place to live, choose the right schools and activities for your kids, support your spouse, and do everything it takes to settle your family into a new country and create a life for yourself.

Whether you're starting your first move overseas or have been in town a while – but still can't get the hang of it – pick up this book, flip to any page and find thought-provoking ideas and encouragement for your journey.

Moving to a new country requires a lot of unpacking, not only your boxes, but your life too. With this guide

(aka magic wand) in hand, *Unpack: A Guide to Life as an Expat Spouse* will help you with the heavy lifting.



# Part I

## Starting Out

### 1. What the heck is an expat?

“My husband just told me the company might move us to Timbuktu and offered us an “expat” package. What the heck is an expat and is that something I even want to be?

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Hold on, help is on the way.

“Expat” is short for “expatriate.” It means, “a person who lives outside their native country.” And you’re reading a book written by two of them. But if you ask us what it is... well it’s much, *much* more!

Becoming an expat means you take on a whole new lifestyle.

When you start out you might be anxious, excited, nervous or shy, but we’ve found that once you get into the groove, being an expat means you become

universally more adventurous and curious about cultures and places. You'll open yourself up to the world and learn to be comfortable exploring it.

Expats discover stepping out of their comfort zone doesn't have to be terrifying. They seize opportunities and are continually expanding their horizons.

As co-authors of this book we've each had very different expat experiences, but we both love the choices we've made. That doesn't mean it hasn't been a roller coaster, we've had our ups and downs. But along the way we've learned to make the most of our expat journeys. We'll be sharing our real-life advice and hands-on solutions here, to help you make the most of your life as an expat.

Regardless of your posting or situation, there are universal truths to help ease your entry into this great adventure, so keep reading. You're going to figure this out.

## OUR ADVICE

**Becoming an expat means you embark on an adventure of a lifetime!**

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### WORDS TO REMEMBER

'To live will be an awfully big adventure.'

**Peter Pan in *Peter Pan*, J.M. Barrie**

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## 2. Do we turn our world upside down?

“I've researched websites and browsed travel blogs, but I still don't know if I want to live the expat life. Do I want to leave my friends and family behind? Can I handle a move to another country?”

—————

We understand that it's one thing to dream about living in a new country, but a whole other kettle of fish to pack up and move everything you own. We won't lie to you, *it's big*. But if you can handle a little bit of adventure, you can manage this and will even grow to love it.

Yes, you could stay in your comfort zone, but if you don't take the chance to step out you'll never expand your worldview, travel to exotic places, or gain new perspectives on... well, everything.

We hear what you might be saying, “Do I really *need* to change my worldview?” Maybe not. But the world is expanding at a phenomenal rate and here's your opportunity to see it differently. Take this as our gentle nudge to say, *don't pass it up*.

It's challenging to adapt to a new lifestyle and culture, but with a little flexibility you'll learn to handle far more than you'd suspect. Saying goodbye to friends and family is difficult, but this is not “goodbye” forever.

You're about to expand your world *and* your friends' and family's world too. This is an opportunity for everyone in your circle of influence to adapt and grow. You'll miss the folks from back home, but given time you'll learn how to be there and support one another in a different way.

If you base your decision solely on what's *easiest* to do in life, you'll miss out on meaningful experiences and what makes the world exciting – the variety. If you have the opportunity to discover new cultures, new friendships, and new ideas with your family, why not do it? Say YES!

#### OUR ADVICE

**Opportunities like this don't come along every day. Your family back home will take this journey with you in their own way, and you'll be expanding their worldview too.**

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#### WORDS TO REMEMBER

'It's better to look back on life and say:  
I can't believe I did that, than to look  
back and say: I wish I did that.'

**Anonymous**

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### 3. Is it fair to turn our kids' world upside down?

“*My kids have lots of friends at school and in our neighborhood. We're comfortable here and close to family. Should I make them change everything because I want to move? Is it fair to take them away from what's familiar and plunge them into the unknown?*

---

As a parent it's your job to set boundaries, enforce bedtimes, make curfews, teach manners, and decide what to feed your children for dinner.

This move is just another one of those choices you'll make to shape your child's future. It's not about what's fair or unfair. There are no good or bad choices here, just *different* choices and they're both okay.

Moving abroad will open their world up to new possibilities and turn them into global citizens. Staying home will give them a different childhood experience, one that is constant and filled with its own challenges. Like anything else you decide for your children, this choice has to be based on what's important to you.

Expat children will come to view the world differently. They don't live next door to the same girl or boy their whole childhood, nor do they add a new mark to the

kitchen door every time they grow a couple of inches. Your kids will learn to cross cultural barriers and travel the world confidently, knowing that the unknown doesn't need to be scary.

It's a unique way to grow up in the world. If you value that, then don't worry about the "fairness" of the situation. Kids don't think it's fair to have to eat broccoli either, but it's good for them.

### OUR ADVICE

**It isn't fair or unfair. It's a choice that will shape them, define their perspective on the world, and give them tools that will serve them throughout their lives.**

From those who have been there

### An expat story

"How could my parents not hear what I had been repeatedly saying for months, I do not want to move!

I could not believe my parents were moving me halfway across the world from the city I grew up in, the place where I built friendships, was surrounded by family, and created all my

memories. The fear of the unknown cluttered my brain for months.

My parents tried to explain that as I would be attending an international school, the kids were used to having new kids and would be super outgoing and accepting. I wasn't buying it.

Luckily, my mom found a buddy program at the school I would be attending, which put me in touch with a girl who would be in my grade. I messaged back and forth with her a few times, which seemed to calm my nerves.

Although I cried the whole flight, we finally made the big jump to our new home country. The first week I felt like we were simply on a family vacation but, to my dismay, I had to start school.

On the first day I left my house with my head down, circling with thoughts. However, I returned home that day with my head held high and a smile across my face. Despite the fact other students had their friend groups formed, they were warm and welcoming towards me. They made me feel as if I was already one of them. This was such a relief to both my parents and me.

Because people come and go frequently at international schools, they have activities in

place that allow the new students to establish relationships with their new peers. At our school we had grade level trips. Each grade goes somewhere within the country during the second week of school to bond with their classmates and to experience the local culture. Although my mom was a nervous wreck, this was honestly the best thing that happened to me.

The trip not only allowed me to get to know my new classmates, but also gave them a chance to get to know me. With the foundation for the year set, I had my mind on the future of my time here, rather than weeping over my life in the United States.

Three years later I am still living abroad, with a completely different mindset. The opportunities and relationships I have built here are one of a kind and will be something I carry my whole life. I am only sixteen, yet my adventures have already taught me much more than textbooks and teachers. Leaving my hometown was hard, but it opened eyes and made me realize the many opportunities the world has in store.”

**Hallie Marcellus — 10th grade student**  
American/Canadian, lives in Sweden

## 4. Telling the kids

“My husband and I are ready to say “yes,” but we aren’t quite sure when or how to tell the kids. Do we include them in the decision or do we wait to tell them until after the contract is signed?”

If you can wait to share information about the move, hold off until after the contract is signed, particularly if your children are younger. It’s best not to burden them too soon, and don’t mention it *at all* if you’re unsure the contract will be final.

Three months before the move is a good time to share “*the news*.” This gives ample lead-time for questioning, goodbyes and packing. Any longer and your kids might find reasons to struggle, and shorter can be a bit of a shock.

Keep in mind that the minute you mention moving, it’s done and you can’t undo it. If you’re lucky your kids will react with excitement, but be prepared for emotional responses such as anger or sadness. It doesn’t mean they don’t want to go, it’s just their initial response to change. Your heart might break to see them upset, but their first response is often based on fears and anxieties that don’t reflect how happy they’ll be when they get there.

If you want to include your children in the decision process, be sure to consider their age, maturity and temperament. Are they able to see the pros and cons and contribute to a discussion? Do you really want them to have a vote? You might be asking for more upheaval than you bargained for.

Either way, whenever you choose to tell the kids, pick a moment when family members are all together – you want them to hear the news from you. Lead with information to spark their particular interests. If they love animals, talk about the local species. If they're into music and art, emphasize the city's culture. Highlight the positives and most likely they'll pick up on your enthusiasm. If they're old enough for social media try lining up connections with kids their age. Positive reviews from peers go a long way toward easing anxieties and getting them on board with the coming move.

## OUR ADVICE

**Growing up brings enough uncertainty for children to worry about so avoid creating more. Wait until the contract is signed to announce the move.**

From those who have been there

## An expat story

“We were quite worried to tell our boys about the move to Copenhagen. We planned to tell them Saturday morning to have the weekend to pick up the pieces and mop up the sadness and tears that were going to ensue. We psyched ourselves up and gave the boys a great pancake breakfast.

Honestly, I felt sick. How could I break it to them? So we told them.

Noah's response: ‘Can I play football?’ Yes. ‘Can I have another pancake?’ Yes. ‘Can we go to Legoland again?’ Yes. Then Thomas: ‘Right, are we going swimming now?’ I, on the other hand, was a complete mess.

Their first day in the new school was amazing. Thomas came home with three best friends and Noah cried because he couldn't stay all day. Honestly they were amazing and by the end of the week it was like they'd been there forever.

Children are fantastically resilient, and we see it time and time again. I think they take their cue from their parents and the biggest conclusion we have come to since moving abroad is that it

doesn't matter which house or country we live in, it's just that wherever we are together is home. Bit slushy and openly emotional for Brits but it's true."

**Sarah Davies – Head of Everything at [davies.com](https://www.davies.com)**

British, has lived in Sweden & Denmark

## 5. The contract is signed

“It's official, the move is happening. I've told everyone, but now I'm having second thoughts. I keep thinking about what we'll miss out on here. It feels like too much is happening.

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At some point the romance of living in a foreign country will seem, well, a little less romantic. But don't forget those initial feelings of falling in love with your dream.

This is the moment to take a few deep breaths, go for a walk, and reconnect with all the reasons you chose to take this path. Accept moving is a process and you're just getting started, so don't stress out about things that haven't even happened yet.

Stay in the present.

Preparing for change is ALWAYS hard, and something this big can feel overwhelming. It doesn't mean you should regret your decision or change your mind. *Would you have decided to quit giving birth when labor was at its most intense?* Of course not. You knew the best thing that ever happened to you was on its way. So stay strong. This decision is one of the best you've ever made, now you just have to see it through.

When moving gets intense, and everything is whirling through your head, it simply means change is coming. Every expat goes through this phase *no matter how many times they've moved*. Bear in mind any problem can be fixed – lost passports can be reissued, plane tickets rescheduled, medical records reprinted – there is no disaster so large that patience and fortitude can't find a solution.

### OUR ADVICE

**It's natural for you to worry with such a big change ahead. Take it step by step and everything will be fine.**

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#### WORDS TO REMEMBER

'Doubt yourself and you doubt everything you see. Judge yourself and you see judges everywhere. But if you listen to the sound of your own voice, you can rise above doubt and judgment. And you can see forever.'

Nancy Lopez, Retired US Golfer

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## 6. The kids don't want to go

“*The move is a week away and the kids are panicking. They're clutching at straws to figure out ways to stay here. I hate being the “mean parent,” tearing them away from friendships and a life they love. I wish I could promise the move will be great, but I can't and that makes me feel guilty.*

---

Kids are resistant to lots of things their parents want them to do, but don't get trapped in guilt. Sure you can't promise paradise, but you *can* promise them an adventure and the memory of a lifetime.

If they're not buying that... it's not too early to start planning your first vacation. Get them excited about a place they *do* want to go.

If they're worried about school and making friends ask the school in your new area if another student your kid's age can email them. Having a peer's opinion can go a long way to assuage worries. (The blessings of the Internet in a global world.)

Remember, we are all resistant to the unknown. It's easier to take the path more traveled, but keep reassuring them that when they arrive and start school, they're going to meet other kids going through the same thing



they are experiencing. Their enthusiasm will wax and complaints will wane. It's all going to happen in time.

Don't let guilt cloud your advice. Keep listening, knowing that ultimately this experience will be for their growth. Overcoming challenges builds strength of character – a skill that will last a lifetime.

### OUR ADVICE

**As the move gets closer, resistance is normal. Hold their hand and keep listening. Don't let guilt cloud your parental voice of reason.**

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#### WORDS TO REMEMBER

'You can't make everyone happy.  
You are not pizza.'

**Anonymous**

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## 7. Where to live

“*Our family has always lived in the suburbs near the kids' school, but living in the burbs in our new country will make for a long commute to work and school is in a busy area. Most expats live near school, but I can't imagine life without a big back yard. How do I choose which area to live in?*

---

You might not know which area to live in, but you do know yourself. Are you the type of person who needs people? Do you enjoy being a core part of a group or do you feel more comfortable on the outside, stepping into a circle of friends when it suits you?

When moving to a new country we tend to look for the lifestyle that emulates the last place we were happy. If we lived in a house in the “burbs” we might associate happiness with a large dwelling place and yard. But before you make the house vs. high-rise decision, take a good honest look at yourself.

If you need people, live near your main source of socializing regardless of the type of housing available. If you have school-aged children it's a no brainer, stay close to the school or wherever most families live that will be the center of your community life. If you like your space or feel overwhelmed by groups then living a

little further out is okay. If you're honest about who you are, you'll find the right home for you.

Happiness and success in your expat life has less to do with your type of housing and more to do with finding what suits you and your family's personality. We've seen unhappy expats because they held onto the big house in the country dream when what they needed was a small house near the school with an easy commute that offered more time to be involved. Know yourself and choose accordingly.

## OUR ADVICE

**Don't necessarily try to recreate what you had, look for the area that supports you and your family's social needs.**

From those who have been there

### An expat story

"As we were preparing to move abroad, the big question of where to live seemed a daunting decision to make considering I was not familiar with the city at all.

In order to narrow our options, my husband and I chose to pursue accommodations similar to what

we call "home." I convinced myself we needed to create something familiar because I thought that would make our adjustment easier.

When we arrived we spent six weeks in a temporary apartment in the city, near the school, until our container arrived from the US. I walked the kids to school every day, we discovered beautiful parks, spent time making friends and discovered a whole new way of living.

Once our boxes arrived we moved into the house we chose in the suburbs. We had a yard, the kids had their trampoline and a lifestyle similar to what we had at home.

When we had unpacked and settled into our routine, it was obvious I had tried to recreate our living arrangements in a place, in a society, which is nothing like the place we knew as home. After a couple of months, I longed to be in the city.

I wanted to be closer to the school, closer to the social events and happenings, closer to the restaurants and bakeries, etc. It was then I realized I was missing out on an opportunity to experience something completely unique and new.

For our family, living in the city, in an apartment, would have been another part of the adventure.

I now understand it's not necessary to stick with what you know to find comfort and happiness, and embracing what the new host has to offer can make the adjustment easier."

**Misty Wright – Creative Homemaker**

American, lives in Sweden

## 8. The look-see

“*There's so much to do in so little time, I can't possibly choose a house that quickly. I have five different areas to explore – four homes to tour in each – plus three schools to visit. I need to set up a bank account, check mobile phone plans, and research local gyms and playgrounds. And I'm expected to meet the new boss's wife... all in five days!*

We realize it seems like an overwhelming task, but you're not alone in sorting out all the details (even if you feel alone). If you've been allotted five days, experience will have told the company or relocation agency that it's time enough. If you can, let HR or your relocation agent put your schedule together. If not, take a deep breath and know that just like countless expats before you, it can be done. You will get there and make all the right decisions.

When moving into new territory you might feel inclined to take control and micromanage, but if you can, rely on the people who have been there before and use their advice. Recommendations from others will save you enormous amounts of time, money, and headaches. Ask for help – we can't emphasize this enough. Seek out information from those who have been through the process, it's invaluable.