

DEAL OR NO DEAL:

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WHILE ALL INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENTS PRESENT HURDLES FOR TRANSFERRING EMPLOYEES AND THEIR FAMILIES, SOME CITIES HAVE SERIOUS HEALTH AND SAFETY CONCERNS THAT MAY PLACE ASSIGNEES IN JEOPARDY. USING DATA FROM ORC WORLDWIDE'S, NEW YORK, NY, 2006 *LOCATION-SPECIFIC SURVEYS OF INTERNATIONAL ASSIGNMENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES*, BLACKHURST AND LOHBECK EXAMINE EXPATRIATES' MAIN CONCERNS IN 20 DIFFICULT DESTINATIONS.



DIFFICULT EXPATRIATE DESTINATIONS EXPLAINED

Among the chief concerns in getting an expatriate assignment off the ground are cultural differences, housing availability, and the (generally higher) cost of living in the new assignment location. Will a transferring family be able to communicate with a Manila, Philippines, shopkeeper and purchase the correct train ticket? How much more will it cost to feed a family of three in Tokyo, Japan? Are there international schools—or their equivalent—in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia?

While expatriates fret about fitting into the new office routine and performing under very different cultural management styles, their spouses and part-

ners—often unable to work in many host locations—address the diverse settling-in matters that prove to be a daily concern.

But when an expatriate accepts an assignment to a foreign location that imposes hardships or arduous circumstances, different concerns come to light. Factors such as the following might very well be the focus of conversations around the dinner table in which expatriates decide whether to bring their families or go alone, whether to opt for a short-term or long-term assignment, or whether to go at all:

- Will it be safe to bring my family?
- How can we survive in a city where physicians do not speak our language?
- Must we live in a security compound with armed guards?
- How can I bring my daughter, who suffers from asthma, into a severely polluted environment?
- Must I vary my routine to avoid kidnapping?

ORC Worldwide's *2006 Location-Specific Surveys of International Assignment Policies and Practices* focused on 20 cities that present various difficult conditions for expatriates (See chart 1.).

This article presents the main issues of concern for expatriates living and working in these host locations, with data from ORC's *Location Evaluation Reports*, which provide detailed descriptions of specific conditions in these cities.

CHART 1: 20 DIFFICULT EXPATRIATE DESTINATIONS IN ASIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

COUNTRY	CITY(IES)
China	Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Suzhou
India	Bangalore, Delhi, Mumbai
Indonesia	Jakarta
Japan	Tokyo
Malaysia	Kuala Lumpur
Philippines	Manila
Saudi Arabia	Riyadh
Singapore	Singapore
South Korea	Seoul
Taiwan	Taipei
Thailand	Bangkok
United Arab Emirates	Dubai
Vietnam	Ho Chi Minh City

Source: ORC Worldwide's 2006 Location-Specific Surveys of International Assignment Policies and Practices

Breathing May Be Hazardous to Your Health

Ten of the 20 cities highlighted by ORC's survey—Bangkok, Thailand; Delhi and Mumbai, India; Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, all in China; Taipei, Taiwan; and Jakarta, Indonesia—had pollution ranked as the most worrisome issue for expatriate families, with the worst conditions occurring in Beijing, Delhi, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen (Shenzhen expatriates reported a number of issues that tied for first place: disease and poor sanitation, pollution, inadequate medical care, and lack of recreational facilities.). For assignees in three other cities—Bangalore, India; Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia—pollution represents expatriates' second most serious concern.

In host locations that experience pollution as a serious challenge, the condition is often the result of a combination of tainted water and air.

Water pollution typically stems from contamination by chemical fertilizers and pesticides, industrial effluents, untreated waste, and the occasional toxic spill. The main contributors to air pollution typically include emissions from industry incinerators (power stations, cement factories, manufacturing plants, and the like), a high number of motor

vehicles on the roads, reliance on soft coal for energy, and dust from ongoing construction projects (particularly in rapidly growing and emerging economies). All of these conditions result in high levels of pollutants, such as particulate matter, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, and carbon monoxide.

Some cities have unique conditions that exacerbate the air pollution problem. For example:

- Pollution in Delhi is worse in the hot months before monsoon season, with pollution from cooking fires exacerbating the conditions.
- In Jakarta, dust from pollution mixes with water particles to create haze, while smoke from seasonal brush fires in central and eastern Java, Indonesia, contribute to smog that lasts until the monsoon season. Smoke and haze from seasonal forest fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan on Borneo also can affect the city.
- Mumbai residents also have to deal with nightly burning of garbage in the municipal dump, with the release of high levels of toxic and carcinogenic chemicals.
- Taipei's government stopped using standard international measures to gauge air pollution because the numbers registered so high they began to cause panic. Leaks from gas cylinders used for cooking and heating water worsen

the situation, and surrounding mountains trap the smog. Disposal of low-level radioactive waste also is problematic.

Too Many Cars, Too Many Horns

Traffic issues considered burdensome in these 20 cities include poor infrastructure, unreliable roadways, the risk of carjacking, traffic congestion, and the accompanying unpleasantness of air pollution. Four of the ORC-surveyed cities—Kuala Lumpur; Seoul, South Korea; Singapore, Singapore; and Tokyo—had traffic congestion ranked as their worst problem, with Bangkok, Manila, Shanghai, and Taipei having traffic congestion rated as their second most serious concern. Conditions in the top four cities include the following:

- Kuala Lumpur drivers often face bottlenecks, as well as slowdowns in rainy weather.
- Seoul's frequent political demonstrations can cause severe disruptions, not to mention place expatriates in harm's way. Driving standards are sometimes erratic, making driving in the city stressful.
- The Singapore government uses an electric road-pricing system to restrict the number of vehicles in the central business district because parking is sparse. What makes driving even more inconvenient is the cost of buying and maintaining a car, along with filing annual documentation.

CHART 2: SECURITY MEASURES PROVIDED BY EMPLOYERS

SECURITY MEASURE	MANILA	RIYADH
Cellular telephone	50%	50%
Alarm system	50%	20%
Unarmed guard(s)	0	10%
Armed guard(s)	13%	20%
Security consultant	25%	50%
Enclosed home/compound	63%	80%

Source: ORC Worldwide's 2006 Location-Specific Surveys of International Assignment Policies and Practices

■ Tokyo's traffic jams and the long commutes to the city from some suburbs can make driving slow and frustrating. With many road signs written only in Japanese, expatriates often choose to use public transportation.

Is There a Qualified Doctor in the House?

Health and the need for medical attention are serious concerns, particularly if a family member suffers from a chronic health condition. Expatriates worry about inadequate facilities, lack of state-of-the-art technology, inability of medical staff to communicate in major world languages, poor sanitation, expired pharmaceuticals, limited supplies, inconsistent training of medical staff, and the like. Three cities—Bangalore, Ho Chi Minh City, and Shenzhen—had this issue ranked number one, with Beijing, Delhi, and Mumbai citing it as their second most serious concern.

Expatriates living in the top three cities reported conditions that include:

- Sanitation standards below international norms in Bangalore.
- Poor sanitation facilities, an inadequate sewage system, and flooding during Ho Chi Minh City's rainy season, along with reports of human cases of avian flu.
- Contaminated water and unsanitary food handling, with reports of human-related avian flu in Shenzhen.

Expatriates living in such locations typically face overall difficulties in the level and availability of medical care.

In Shenzhen, for example, expatri-

ates can receive adequate routine health care at the local International SOS clinic with English-speaking doctors (or large hotels that have access to a clinic or doctor), but serious illnesses usually require a trip to Hong Kong or elsewhere abroad. Conditions in local hospitals are problematic—medical technology is outdated, sanitary conditions are poor, few health care professionals speak a foreign language, and ambulance services are inadequate. The city also has no Western-style pharmacies.

Pickpockets, Kidnappers, and Terrorists

Safety addresses crime in all forms, including robbery, assault, kidnapping, carjacking, political violence, terrorism, and the threat of riots. Three of the cities surveyed by ORC have their own particular set of problems.

In Manila, crime rates are high, with assault and credit card fraud prevalent. Criminal behavior, however, is not uniform throughout the city. Pickpocketing, mugging, and burglary are particular problems around the Makati and Malate business and entertainment districts. Kidnapping rarely affects foreigners in the city, as local ethnic Chinese are the main target, but it remains a threat in remote areas of the country.

As police are generally inefficient, local staff should handle dealings with them. And with criminals often armed, most businesses, hotels, and banks employ armed guards, while expatriates usually live in protected compounds or guarded apartment

buildings. These and other sensible precautions, such as avoiding public transportation, significantly reduce risk.

In Riyadh, terrorism is a top concern, with the Saudi Arabian government confronting a sustained terrorist campaign against both foreign and Saudi interests by loose-knit networks of Islamic extremists. The threat is greatest in Riyadh, where the government has launched a harsh crackdown on extremists, with police raids on terror suspects often ending violently.

Anti-Western sentiment is strong throughout the country, putting facilities and personnel with U.S. or UK affiliation particularly at risk, as well as symbols of the ruling Al Saud family. "Soft" targets—housing compounds, hotels, offices, landmark buildings, shopping centers, and restaurants—are considered especially at risk. Unfortunately, most expatriates live in enclosed compounds designed for foreigners, and the high concentration of such residents living in one place makes them a target. To avert trouble, the government has instructed the Saudi National Guard to provide security.

In Jakarta, political violence is a key concern and the threat of terrorist attack is very high throughout the country. Islamic extremist and terrorist groups continue to issue threats against American and other Western interests—many Western governments advise against all nonessential travel. The political violence has a broad-based nature beyond Islamic terrorists: separatist, sectarian, and inter-ethnic violence are serious problems in many parts of the country.

POLLUTION, TRAFFIC, MEDICAL CARE, AND SAFETY ARE NOT THE ONLY CAUSES FOR CONCERN FOR EXPATRIATES, WHO ALSO CONSIDER OTHER ISSUES TO BE PROBLEMATIC, DEPENDING ON THEIR BACKGROUNDS, CIRCUMSTANCES, AND THE SEVERITY OF THE CONDITIONS IN A SPECIFIC LOCATION.

Also, demonstrations by trade unionists, Islamic militants, students, and civil rights campaigners are regular features of life in Jakarta. While most are peaceful, they quickly can turn violent without warning. Expatriates are advised to remain vigilant and exercise extreme caution, especially in commercial and public places frequented by foreigners (See chart 2.).

Preparation — and Warning — Goes a Long Way

Pollution, traffic, medical care, and safety are not the only causes for concern for expatriates, who also consider other issues to be problematic, depending on their backgrounds, circumstances, and the severity of the conditions in a specific location. For example:

- Goods and services are limited in Shenzhen and Suzhou, China,

where the quality of shoes and clothing are usually troublesome—sizes usually are not acceptable to Westerners.

- The climate is difficult for residents in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, who are not used to extreme heat and humidity.
- Overcrowding—with the accompanying noise and pollution—adversely affects expatriates in Tokyo and Hong Kong.
- Recreation is limited in Riyadh, where public entertainment is virtually nonexistent and segregation of the sexes is practiced at public recreational facilities. Saudi Arabia has no nightlife consistent with Western entertainment options, forcing expatriate communities to organize their own recreational activities.

Remember, what conditions trouble one expatriate family may not

faze another. Yet there are some conditions—such as the threat of violence or disease—that affect everyone living in a specific host location. Understanding and anticipating those conditions before an expatriate accepts an assignment and makes the actual move can go a long way toward the success of that assignment—thus, benefiting everyone. 🗒



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