



REPATRIATION – “THE UNEXPECTED SHOCK WITH THE EXPECTED”

Destinations
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Bethilde Keij, a Dutch national and former Outpost Focal Point in Paris, reflects on her repatriation journey to The Netherlands.

After fourteen years abroad in Paris, London, Doha (Qatar), Stavanger (Norway), Geoje (South Korea) and Perth (Australia) we were heading back “home”, to The Netherlands, summer 2018. From 2004 to 2018 our life had been all about moving, settling in, making new friends and making many houses our home. Now we were ready again to make our home country our “real home”.

Before we started expat life, we had already decided that if we would have children and the oldest would be ready for high school, we would be heading back home. A thoughtful decision to ensure our children would grow roots in the Netherlands, a place we – as parents – want to call home. In 2006, 2007 and 2010, our children were born in Paris and Qatar. In 2018, the oldest was 12 and ready to start secondary education – we knew our time abroad was up. They had never actually lived in The Netherlands, but we had prepared them by keeping up with their Dutch Grammar, Spelling and Vocabulary through home schooling (aside from attending their International Schools) while living abroad.

As a sociologist, I had given many workshops to the Chamber of Commerce (Stavanger) and Outpost (Norway and Korea) to expats on how to make the most out of expat life. I had prepared other families about expatriation and repatriation and thought I knew what would be ahead. With every move I had made sure that the children would settle well into their new schools and their new home. I had made sure that my husband was ready to work from day one in our new country. I had retrained myself to be a teacher and, in every country, I had been working as a music teacher, a (voluntary) choir conductor, and/or setting up musicals in international schools. Having moved houses six times, we had our “script” ready for another move and was prepared to do the same again, except this time I thought it would be simpler as we were moving back to the Netherlands.

“I had changed through the expat experience”

Yet, this time it was very different. The grief of saying goodbye again to friends who had become family, to homes, schools, jobs and an international setting that had become our “normal”, was felt ever so more – maybe even six times more. Settling back in the Netherlands was wonderful in the sense of being close to family again. But sometimes very hard in many other and unexpected ways.

Feeling strange and sometimes misunderstood despite looking “so Dutch”; feeling anxious when entering the schoolyard (who do I talk to? And what to say when nothing I say seems

“normal?”), trying to find and buy a house which took us a year, trying to keep up or even to catch up with family and friends while also trying to maintain friendships abroad. Losing part of my identity and trying to find out who I was back in The Netherlands made me somehow try to pick up where I left in 2004, but I had changed through the expat experience.

I thought I had to roll out our “script” again. While my husband and children were doing very well, I rushed into new jobs and new purposes. It took me some time to realize that I did not need to take on this country as a new posting. After settling in our house “where we want to grow old” I started to simply enjoy more peace and rush less into new work and projects. I started to realize more and more that this “posting” would not be just 3 or 4 years but “forever”. I simply could not just roll out our script but had to re-invent myself – this time for “real settlement”.

Looking back, I now know that repatriation – or as Ruth van Reken calls it the “unexpected shock with the expected” – should not be taken too lightly. The positive aspects of living abroad and the foundations we made as a family in these different countries cannot be taken away. They are meant to be built on, also here now at home in The Netherlands.

The challenges lie in the accepting of and giving time to the discomfort, struggle and grief when settling in and finding our sense of belonging – without the international setting that once felt so normal. I allowed myself to be shaken. And there are many opportunities to find a new purpose, but with repatriation I can only say: give yourself some more time to adjust. You will stay here for a while.... You are home!



Bethilde Keij is a sociologist, school teacher, conductor, singer and former expat. After living abroad for 14 years, she now lives in The Netherlands with her husband and three children.

