



“ Before you arrive, you have to leave. If your destination is a new home on the other side of the world for three years, leaving takes a lot of effort – both emotional and practical ”

Leaving HOME



It all seemed like such a good idea until I found myself drowning in the mother of all ‘to do’ lists. We were moving to the other side of the world, with much anticipation and some anxiety about what lay ahead.

But then I took a breath and realised that before you arrive, you have to leave.

Leaving home to live overseas will mean something different to each family. It may be a permanent move where visits from friends and family will be rare; it could be a well-organised move to another ex-pat community. It may involve a total immersion in a new language, terrain or temperature. Our adventure was a three year move to Seattle; a fairly familiar Western culture but still a long and expensive trip for most family and friends.

Those same friends kindly threw a leaving party for us; we still have the photos from that day on our huge

American fridge. I stare at the children, frozen in time on a bouncy castle in the village hall – trying to match the children to the new photos that arrive in Christmas cards.

In one photo we look nervous, as we cut into a cake decorated with the Stars and Stripes, in front of so many people who shared our daily life in England. I wonder who the party was for – the parents, the children, the people leaving or the people staying?

Every family has its own intricate web of family, friends and friends who are as important as family; each one may need a different approach. We involved some family with each stage of our decision-making process, so they could understand why the opportunity was so important for us. With others we told them only when it was a done deal. Some friends didn’t find out that we were leaving until I handed them an invite to that leaving party, but that was just a result of some really bad planning.

I realised that my friends were all entitled to their own reactions to our news. They may have thought we were lucky and adventurous or selfish and irresponsible – but they all listened to the ups and downs of our preparations. Be prepared for some people to almost close down as it gets closer to your leaving day.

Local friends were finding out that their children had a confirmed place at the village infant school; I found out that my son would be reciting the Pledge of Allegiance every morning in his new kindergarten. Just four months earlier we had all been choosing school uniform sizes and discussing the merits of joining the PTA.

There are many ways of keeping all these relationships going of course, depending on which corner of the world you are going to. We were heading to one of the world’s most wired-up cities. Home to Microsoft’s 30,000

Below: Adam and Daniel, a little nervous, arrive at SeaTac Airport, Seattle

“ My seemingly endless ‘to-do’ list included a fraught trip to the American Embassy, introducing my parents to the concept of a webcam and explaining again to my 4-year-old again why Tom couldn’t come over and play ”



employees, Seattle has wi-fi available on every bus, ferry, most cafés and even my local playground; it was time to teach my parents how to e-mail.

Conversations about webcams started happening so cousins could wave to cousins. We gathered e-mail addresses of friends that until then we had never needed. We also realised that we didn’t know the house numbers of homes where for years we had been turning up for dinner.

You do, of course need to tell your children, if they haven’t already been part of the decision process. Daniel, our 4-year-old, reacted well to colourful maps and atlases and the thought of a first-ever trip on an aeroplane; Adam, our 18-month-old, continued to empty the kitchen cupboard and play with the pans.

Be prepared for mood swings, from lots of questions and anxiety about their new home to a seeming total lack of interest. Young children, in particular, live in the now. Until the shipping container actually arrives, in their world nothing has really changed.

On more of a hunch rather than a definite plan, we gathered memories of home, friends and England to take with us. We are constantly surprised at the situations where we now make use of a small laminated map of the U.K., an old battered calendar of Yorkshire and half a dozen London postcards bought hurriedly three years ago at Heathrow. Even if it’s your intention to bury yourself in a new culture and avoid any ex-pat activity, people will always be interested in where you come from.

Within weeks of arriving we were invited to the annual company picnic – described as an ethnic potluck. This doesn’t mean sitting randomly next to someone from another culture; rather coming up with a traditional dish from your own country to contribute to the meal. I breathed a sigh of relief that I had brought my bible – the Good Housekeeping Cookery Guide, allowing me to make a half decent plate of scones, without the aid of Sainsbury’s.

Below top: Our first time at a professional baseball match - Seattle Mariners play Oakland Athletics

Below bottom: Daniel and Adam in the baseball glove sculpture, outside the Seattle Mariners' home ground, Safeco Field



Children are also often proud to share something of home. In our first year I talked to my son’s class about England with the aid of my calendar of Robin Hood’s Bay and Scarborough Castle; the following year I persuaded eight more parents from other countries to join me. Sitting at the back of a classroom in an American elementary

school, I listened to several very different versions of leaving home; albeit in some cases the leaving had been done several generations ago.

One mother, originally from Bosnia, talked with great sensitivity, and in a language that wasn’t her own, about her experience living through the war. Other parents shared a

Below: Washington has the largest ferry system in the U.S. for commuters and tourists, reaching islands such as Lopez Island, shown here

curious mix of family life from a Hebrew version of “The Cat in the Hat” to an original flamenco dress – we also learned to greet each other in Japanese and Swahili.

Two years earlier, we had still been working through that ‘to do’ list. Some tasks on the list seemed never-ending – trying to finish every DIY job we had put off for the last few years, in order to rent out our house. There was also the stressful trip to the American Embassy for a visa interview. Other tasks were decidedly less stressful – as U.S. Customs forbids any food or drink in our shipping container, all our alcohol supplies had to be drunk or given away.

Eventually, of course, we did leave – on a sunny Wednesday in August 2005. We had our first few days in a local hotel, with Daniel asking, “Why are all these people having breakfast in our new house?”

In our new rental house, as a link from our old world to our new world, I had brought along part of the boys’ bedroom – the parts which fitted neatly into my handbag. My husband fixed the 10 wooden animal letters onto the new bedroom door to spell out D.A.N.I.E.L and A.D.A.M. The “to do” list was finally finished – we had arrived. ■

Rebecca Gardner is a freelance writer living with her family in Seattle. They will be returning to the U.K. in 2008, after three years living in the U.S., when they will have to learn to leave all over again.



FACTFILE

- **Young children don't need and can't cope with too much information about their new life. Start with coming to terms with a new house and making new friends.**
- **Look for suitable children's books. The “First Experiences” range from Usborne Books has a combined volume including both “Moving House” and “Going on a Plane”. Good for toddlers and early readers. The Complete Book of First Experiences by Anne Civardi. Publisher: Usborne Books (Jul 2005)**
- **Take photos to remember your day-to-day life and friends – school, back garden, corner shop or local park.**
- **Have a farewell party but keep it simple for everyone's sake; by this time you will really be getting busy. Also leave plenty of time for saying goodbye to friends and family who live further away.**
- **Design ‘moving cards’ with your new details – especially an e-mail contact. Let the kids customize a few of their own to hand out to their friends.**
- **Take along a map, atlas or globe to show children their old and new countries. There are great simplified children's versions of all these geographical tools. P.S. If you don't know already, find out the difference between England, Britain and the U.K. – a frequent question from our new friends!**
- **If you're going to a developed country with a bustling internet life, try looking online before you go for groups that reflect your interests and activities – mum's groups, children's sports or language classes. It helps to have something to look forward to where adults and children can both start making friends.**
- **Remember your whole family life is changing. Everyone will have a meltdown at some point – including you. Accept it and move on.**
- **How does your child react to new experiences? Try not to overload them. Choose just a few things to explore when you get there – we used the fantastic local zoo – and also pick out a few things that are going to be familiar. Let them know that their new world still has playgrounds with swings and a slide, somewhere to buy an ice-cream or other treats and the day still ends with their favourite bedtime story.**
- **Be patient with a 4-year-old's grasp of time and distance. Be prepared for endlessly answering the question “But WHY can't Tom come and play at our new house?”**
- **Embrace the opportunity – as individuals and as a family – and enjoy your new life!**