

STORIES FROM MY MOTHER

A daughter and mother discuss their respective expat experiences and how things were different for expats 50 years ago compared to today.

BY CLARA WIGGINS



Clara Wiggins: For you, moving abroad aged just 21 must have been very daunting. How did it feel leaving your home behind that first time you were posted?

Rowena Quantrill: Well, I had been away from home at university for three years, so I mainly remember it as being exciting rather than frightening. Perhaps because I had just got married and we were spending our honeymoon in France on our way to Belgium rather added to the excitement!

CW: And how did you keep in touch with your family; how often did you get to see Granny?

RQ: Right through our time overseas (from the 1960s to 1990s), by far our most important form of communication was letters. Telephone calls were for emergencies only and very expensive. From some of our postings, like Cuba, it would

have been almost impossible to phone. The post generally arrived once a week and I still remember the intense disappointment when it was late or didn't turn up at all. Things are so different now with email, Skype, etc. We usually visited home every two years, but Granny managed to come and see us at least once in most of our postings. Looking back, it must have been really tough on her as I was an only child and my father long dead. I know she used to live for letters too and would be desperately disappointed if they didn't turn up.

CW: These days, I feel like I, as the accompanying partner, has as much say in where we go as anyone. We will say 'no' to a posting if it doesn't suit our family needs. How much choice did you ever have in where you were sent?

RQ: Not a lot. We were told we could veto one posting but after that would have to take

whatever was offered. I guess if there had been, say, pressing medical reasons not to go, allowances would have been made. Basically I was just told where we were going. But I think if I had really objected, I would have been listened to.

CW: As you know, I became pregnant while living in Jamaica, but came home to give birth in the U.K. It wasn't so easy for you – you gave birth three times when you were living abroad. What was that like? Did you have the choice to return home for the births?

RQ: Our first baby, your brother Matthew, was born in Brussels and we never considered coming home – what would have been the point really? The next two – you and Toby – were born in Cuba. Looking back, I'm amazed really that no one (not us or the powers that be) said it might not be such a good idea. True, I had had no complications with the first birth, but medical services in Cuba in the mid-1960s were nothing like as good as they are now. My main struggle was to be allowed to give birth naturally and not under general anaesthetic, having the baby pulled out with forceps ... which happened to one of the other embassy wives.

CW: As an expat partner, I lived through an evacuation from Islamabad in 2008. Tell me about some of the emergencies you dealt with.

RQ: We've been pretty lucky, really, as regards political or weather-type emergencies – the main ones have been medical. This includes when your brother Toby got pneumonia when he was two years old, in Cuba. Either he had to stay at hospital alone, or we had to give him the antibiotic injections ourselves at home. We chose the latter, but it was really hard hearing him screaming, "I don't want

the medicine with the nails in it!"

The other major emergency was when your father had a sub-arachnoid hemorrhage in Lagos. All the Nigerian doctors we used were out of town, but luckily the Americans stepped in and diagnosed the problem, saying he needed to fly back to U.K. that day, as it could be fatal. This was arranged but we had all four of you children with us for the holidays, so the next day I had to pack up our chaotic household, and the five of us followed him. We never returned and I was not even allowed back to finish packing up our possessions.

CW: Schooling is always a tough subject when it comes to moving abroad with a family. What sort of choices did you have to make? What happened if you were offered a post where the schools weren't up to the standard you wanted?

RQ: Luckily all of you were still pre-school age in Cuba, or it would have been a real problem – one of the families there home-schooled their children. The Philippines had a good International School, but Nigeria would have been difficult if we had stayed. There are good Nigerian schools, but you needed to put your child's name down at birth to get in. Reluctantly, we made the decision to send you all to boarding school as, otherwise, we could never guarantee schooling where you would have been able to take the necessary exams for further education.

CW: You've visited me in a couple of the places I have been posted to (Jamaica and St. Lucia). How different does life seem to be for expats these days, compared to in your day?

RQ: Several things really struck me – ease

of communications obviously makes a huge difference, both with the Internet and email, and the ability to get international TV, plus being able to fly home quickly and relatively cheaply. From the point of view of a diplomatic

spouse, there seems to be far less involvement in the life of the mission for spouses now. I often resented all the entertaining I was involved in, but it was a way of meeting interesting local people and learning about the politics of the country. It is probably easier for a partner to work or study now using the Internet, which must be a huge help. But I do also feel the world has become a much less safe place than when we were

overseas.

CW: What was your favorite experience of living abroad?

RQ: That's a really hard one, but I think what I really enjoyed was the chance to get to know a country in-depth and to make real friends from different cultures – both from the country we were in and other expatriates. I loved getting off the beaten track too and seeing amazing wildlife; imagine driving through the forest at night and Nightjars rising up everywhere in front of the car, or watching forest elephants rooting around in one of the clearings in the forest of Central African Republic.

CW: And what was your least favorite memory?

RQ: Those times with ill children when I so desperately missed our wonderful national health service. And not so seriously: having to eat a whole sea slug at a Chinese banquet and look as if I was enjoying the experience! ■

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