

# The Newness of Being Here

*You step out of the airport into the heat and humidity and what feels like total chaos. How do you feel: excited, fearful, energized, or do you simply want to “get on with it” and organize your new life?*

**Marilyn Duncan-Webb**

First impressions can be accurate. Yes, the weather can be a challenge, the traffic confusing and the pace of life a disconcerting mix of hustle and laid-back mañana. However, the smiles that greet you at the airport are characteristic of hosts who genuinely want you to think well of your new home and who strive to please you beyond the motivation of making money.

Your first few days are likely spent in a hotel which is comfortingly familiar and demands little of you in terms of functioning in your new home. At the

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same time those days are crucial in finding the right place to live, familiarizing yourself with your new neighborhood and getting your children settled. If you are the non-working spouse, it falls to you to establish a new “home”, a task that will stretch your capabilities in a number of ways that may be new to you.

## **From doing to managing**

For example, you may not have previously lived in a culture where the affluent employ a team of personal helpers: maids and yayas, driver, pool maintenance person, gardener. Your role will change from being a “do-er” to a manager. You may find it discomfiting to have people in effect “waiting” upon you and be uncomfortable employing people to do your washing, make your

bed or tend to your children. Faced with this discomfort, I ask myself, “What good does it for the Philippines if I do my own ironing?” That way, I can justify offering secure, fairly paid employment and a pleasant place to live to someone who may be supporting a sick parent or putting a child through college. My conscience still niggles me, given my egalitarian culture, but that’s the way it is here...and anyway, my helper irons shirts far better than I do. The key to making good choices in those early days, be they renting a house, hiring staff, choosing a vehicle or even where to shop or get your hair cut, are to ask, listen and check it out. Everyone will have an opinion, based on what works for *them* as well as genuinely good or bad experiences. And that’s the pitfall, what works for them may not work for you, so you will need to make your own judgments, depending on your needs as well as the information you receive.

## **Compatible personalities**

Hiring compatible household staff can be fundamental to the happiness of your posting. Of course, absolutely check references and listen to personal recommendations from previous employers, but in a situation where you will have your staff living in your house, it is as important to choose personalities with whom you can relate and people whom you can respect, and

who respect you.

So here you are: you've found a nice house, hired the people you need to maintain it, your kids are settled in one of the international schools, your partner is logging away at the office and you're settling into a new routine. Now what? The honeymoon is over and some of the attractions of the adventure are beginning to pall. The charming smiles front frustrating administrative systems you don't understand; queuing at the pharmacy is an exercise in polite pushiness; you have to visit three different stores to find an unsweetened yogurt and if anyone in a shop says, "yes, mam, blouse, mam?" when you're flipping through a whole rack of the things, you'll feel the urge to scream, "no, actually, sausages, what do you think I'm looking for?" at the poor assistant.

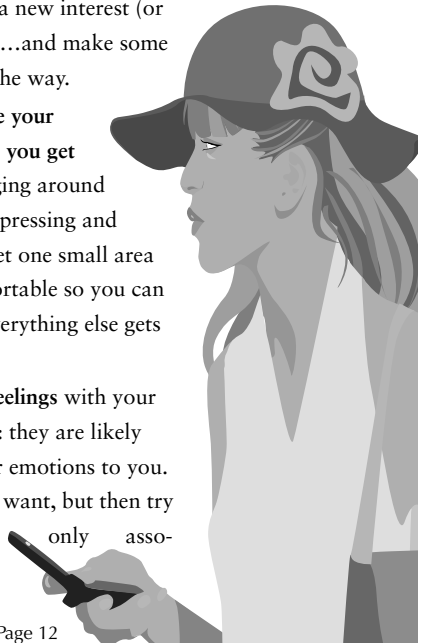
### **Make connections**

This is when you need to make your deeper connections, to link up with others who have been there, done that. However complacent we old hands appear at expat life, we've all experienced those feelings of frustration, fury and, to some extent loneliness. We've all mourned (and to some extent still do) for our old friends, familiar routines, the career we may have abandoned, the adult children or aging parents we left at "home". Yet, we've also embraced the excitement and satisfaction of living in another culture, traveling to new places and congratulated ourselves on making it happen in a new context. Talk with experienced expats for a short while and inevitably you'll elicit a "how to" list for surviving those blue days that set in after the honeymoon:

- **Get connected early:** take every opportunity to meet people from every culture, both familiar and new. It's good to talk (and have a moan) with people from your own culture, but one of the benefits of expat life is that you have the chance to meet people from all over the globe.
- **Don't be afraid to join in:** you never know where you'll meet your soul mate and if you find yourself involved in an activity that really isn't for you, you can bow out gracefully. You may need to be brave enough to seek out these activities. Don't wait to be asked, gather up your courage and ask to join in.
- **Try new things:** you may never have thought of taking up painting, jewelry making, yoga or badminton. Volunteer, either as a fund raiser or hands-on with any of Manila's (or ALIG's) many charitable organizations. This is your chance to find a new interest (or reinvent an old one)...and make some good friends along the way.
- **Don't wait to have your house perfect before you get out and about:** hanging around for contractors is depressing and frustrating. Try to get one small area of your home comfortable so you can retreat to it when everything else gets too much.
- **Talk about your feelings** with your spouse and children: they are likely encountering similar emotions to you. Have a moan if you want, but then try to move on. If you only associate with negative

### **Get a Cellphone**

You'll find landlines vary in quality from bad to unusuable.



# The Newness of Being Here (cont)

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people, you'll spiral downwards.

- **Laugh when you can (preferably at yourself):** cry when you must. Yes, it's OK to cry, you're going through a period of "mourning" for what you may have left behind.

- **Know that it's OK to have "I hate the Philippines" days.** We all have them.

I've lived in Paris and New York to the envy of most of my friends and yet admit to having had "I hate Paris and I hate New York" days. When those hate days turn into hate weeks, then maybe it's time to reflect more deeply and think about how you can change your outlook.

- **Lower your expectations of yourself:** don't expect to be as efficient as you

normally are. You're functioning in a different environment and interacting in a new culture.

- **Nurture yourself:** you don't have to be everyone's carer all the time. Go for a massage, read a comforting book, date with your spouse, watch a familiar movie on DVD, try a new exercise regime. Stop feeling guilty about your feelings!

- **Ask, listen and learn (and read too):** try to find out as much as possible about your new home, its culture, art, literature, customs and people. Understand that cultures are different, but appropriate in their own context, however strange they may seem to you.