

Return of the native

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Singaporeans who have been away for a long time do experience culture shock on their return

Foreigners are not the only ones who experience culture shock when they settle in Singapore. 'Home' can be foreign for returning Singaporeans, too.

From dealing with increased costs of living and adapting to the work culture here, to sweltering in the hot, humid weather, Singaporean returnees told LifeStyle it can take months to settle down in a place where they call home.

This displacement is especially so if they have lived abroad for a number of years, whether in the West or closer to home, in China.

Gripes include property and car prices that have shot through the roof, the rigorous academic culture and the loss of favourite haunts.

But the reasons for their return - often to be closer to families or for better job opportunities - outweigh the cons.

Dr Casey Chan, 64, an adjunct professor at the National University of Singapore (NUS) department of orthopaedic surgery, who also runs his own business developing medical devices, left Singapore for Canada when he was 17, and came back in 1999 when he was 52 years old.

He said he initially had no intention of coming back, but he eventually did so to be closer to his ageing mother, who is now 87.

The biggest difference he noticed was the work culture; he felt Singaporeans were more guarded.

'It took me 11/2 years to get over that; once you get to know people better, it's okay,' he said.

He also noted that buying a car here cost two to three times more than it did in Canada.

Sungei Road, a place he used to frequent for army surplus items, trinkets and electronic parts when he was young, has also changed.

'They redeveloped the area, with Sim Lim Tower and Sim Lim Square. But it's okay, things change,' he said.

Ms Andrea Tan, 27, who studied in Evanston, Illinois, in the United States, and worked in Chicago for eight years, said it took her about five months to adapt to life here when she returned in late 2009. She came back because of the poor economic outlook in the US and job prospects in Asia looked brighter at the time.

Ms Tan, who used to share a high-rise apartment with friends in Chicago and now lives in a semi-detached house in Bukit Timah with her parents, said: 'I was used to the freedom I had

in the US where I didn't have to check in with anyone when I came home. Now, I need to be a lot more aware of my actions because I live with my family and have to be considerate.'

Corporate life also took some adjusting to, she said, as 'Singaporeans tend to be more guarded' and it can take a while to build a relationship with colleagues and clients. She works as a human resource consultant here.

There are no programmes or activities to help overseas Singaporeans re-integrate.

A spokesman for the National Population and Talent Division said the Overseas Singapore Unit, which was set up in 2006 and aims to keep overseas citizens connected to Singapore, 'provides a facilitation role when approached, such as providing the contact to the appropriate agencies for the assistance required'.

However, a unit spokesman said it was prepared to consider coming up with a re-integration programme for Singaporean returnees 'if there is demand'.

Right now, returnees can turn to expatriate groups such as the British Association and the American Association, which help expatriates navigate the Singapore landscape - from where to find housing and employment to understanding the local lingo. The programmes are open to Singaporeans.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies at NUS, noted that studies have shown that long-term overseas residents can experience similar socio-psychological difficulties as foreigners.

'The discomfort is both psychological and behavioural, be it getting used to the pace of living, traffic congestion or a different routine in the workplace,' said Dr Leong, who added that returnees who have completely assimilated into the overseas culture have the toughest time re-adjusting.

NUS sociologist Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser added: 'Some people may surround themselves with fellow Singaporeans and things Singapore while overseas, creating a sort of mini-Singapore, a home away from home.'

'In the absence of such conditions, an overseas Singaporean returning home after many years may experience culture shock.'

Not that all the changes in Singapore are disconcerting. On the entertainment and lifestyle front, returnees told LifeStyle that things have improved.

Ms Teo Jia En, 29, who lived in New York and Michigan over the past 11 years, came back two months ago to expand her US-based online business to Asia and to be closer to her family.

Ms Teo, who returned here with her Italian husband, noted there are more entertainment spots and a wider variety of dining choices and even the island's architecture has improved.

'The cityscape has changed so much. I remember Marina Bay Sands when it was still under construction and now it's up. I don't think we've seen such a quick turnaround anywhere in the world. Now there are buildings sprouting up from nowhere and the skyline got a lot more interesting architecturally.'

There are an estimated 180,000 Singaporeans living, working and studying abroad, up from 150,000 in 2009, based on figures from the Overseas Singapore Unit. But the actual number could well be much higher as the figure includes only overseas citizens who have registered or engaged in activities with the unit.

But even those who return may end up leaving the country again. Among them is Madam Marilyn Loh, 50, who lived in London for a few years in the 1980s and returned in 1990.

Madam Loh, who runs a Turkish restaurant with her husband here and is a mother of two teenagers, said: 'Singapore is a nice country, but somehow, you get bored. I can't really say what it is... it's just a shopping central. And it's also the weather.

'I'll wait until my kids finish their studies. I hope to move back to Britain to live in the countryside.'