

Starting a life in a foreign country as a journalist is not easy. If you're unprepared, don't speak the language and expect that everything will be the same as at home, then it's tougher still. So how can a freelance writer build a life and survive in a foreign country? Preparation is the key, as Helen Kaut, who lives as a foreigner in Britain, investigates.



Emmet Cole . . . endless opportunities



Kyle MacRae – think carefully about relocating

**W**HEN I arrived in Cardiff two and a half years ago I felt under prepared to meet the challenges of a freelancing life. I had just started out as a journalist in Germany and was slowly building contacts there, but due to the declining German economy there was just not enough freelance work available for a beginner.

When I left for Cardiff due to my Welsh partner's new job, I did not know how to obtain a National Insurance number, open a bank account or fill in a tax return, not to mention getting to grips with the NHS!

Fortunately, I was able to read, speak and write English and knew the culture, having studied English and spent most of my holidays in Britain.

Being bilingual was an advantage as I can translate and sell my work to the German market and to English speaking publications, depending on the subject matter. Through the internet, I've stayed in contact not only with my friends and family, but also made connections within the writing community.

If you're planning to relocate, learn from the experiences of the journalists I spoke to about how they prepared.

**LIFE IN FRANCE:** "What I love about France is that it's a restaurant culture, not a pub culture, more intellectual than Britain and not so laddish," says Patricia Mansfield-Devine, editor and feature writer. "We've also been able to buy a house here that we could never have afforded in England. The countryside is beautiful and a constant joy." Although Patricia and her

## Pleasures and pitfalls of working abroad



*Helen Kaut started out as a freelance journalist in 2001 working for German special interest magazines.*

*Her main areas of interest are health, cats, wildlife conservation and travel.*

*Since autumn 2002 she has been based in Cardiff and works also as a PR consultant.*

### By Helen Kaut

husband Steve bought a house in Normandy in 1996, it took careful planning to take the plunge and move to France permanently in 1999. They sold their London home and have never regretted it. "We eased ourselves over here gradually. This cost more money over the years, but we're glad that we didn't just dive in head-first – we've seen so many people have to go back."

Steve, also a journalist, still works for the same clients, and Patricia works mainly as editor of [www.frenchentree.com](http://www.frenchentree.com) an information website about France, and

writes for international property magazines among others. Working in French was never a realistic option as she does not consider her French to be good enough.

The cost of living is a bit lower than in Britain but it takes patience to get used to the French bureaucracy and taxes. Pensions are compulsory and other social charges and tax add up to about 50 per cent being deducted from your gross income, "but in return you get a much better health service".

Importing their seven cats was a struggle, and the couple found themselves without health insurance for a year until they got into the French social security system. Having overcome the obstacles Patricia enjoys her life in a beautiful cottage on a hill overlooking the French countryside. However, she does not think foreigners are well integrated in rural France and most of their friends are either British or French incomers from Paris or Versailles. Patricia recommends reading *Living and Working in France* by David Hampshire to prepare for relocation.

**FRANCE WITH KIDS:** While moving with seven cats poses a challenge, uprooting

# Relocation, relocation, relocation

your children is an even harder decision to make. Kyle MacRae moved with his wife Jill and their two children aged four and eight from Glasgow to Aix-en-Provence in August last year. Their plan was to rent out the Scottish home and test out living in France for a year. Luckily the MacRaes researched thoroughly using newsletters, expat discussion forums and search engines.

In April they visited France to find a home to rent and an international school to enrol their children. The MacRaes settled in quickly and finding freelance work was no problem for Kyle, who already had several book deals lined up. He writes computer manuals for *Haynes Publishing* and features for the *Daily Mirror* and *Computer-active* magazine. "I haven't had to hunt for work, and really it's as easy working here as from home in Glasgow," says Kyle.

He loves the French climate and countryside, but hates "the rudeness, arrogance and bonkers driving". Most of their friends are ex-pats from all over the world. Though his French is not that brilliant he and Jill make every effort to speak it and meet conversation partners for practice, while their children learn French at school.

His main advice is to think carefully about relocating when you have children. He won't be moving there permanently, though. "We have decided to return home for a variety of reasons, including the bureaucratic difficulties of being self-employed in France, our reluctance to throw our children into the French state education system and a desire not to be entirely settled yet. We might want to do this again. Maybe Canada?"

**THE PULL OF LOVE:** In 2001 Irishman Emmet Cole left his rock band *Johnny Pyro* and moved from Dublin to Austin, Texas, after he fell in love with his Mexican-American wife Christine. Getting a work permit proved difficult for him and he was not allowed to work for over a year. In the meantime his wife supported him and he started writing a novel. He had no problem opening a bank account as Christine had one, but getting settled was not easy. "I was completely unprepared for such a move. The fact that we initially lived in a bleak suburb of Austin did not help the transition at all," says Emmet.

Once he received permission he was able to find work pitching various markets in the States as well as in Britain. The

## BE FLEXIBLE AND PATIENT

### BEFORE YOU MOVE:

- Do your research. Find out everything you can about the country you want to move to including the town or area you'll be staying in.
- Tell your editors in advance you are relocating, try to establish contacts with new markets and get some work lined up.
- Try to find freelancers who are already there for help and moral support. [www.freelancejournalism.com](http://www.freelancejournalism.com) has a very helpful mailing list.
- Learn the language if you can. It opens doors to have a basic to medium grasp of the language of your new country.
- Organise as much as you can before you move. This includes: tax advice, finding a home, translating documents if necessary, opening a bank account, sorting out national insurance/social security and healthcare.
- Make sure you have enough money saved up to live on in the first six months.
- If you have children find out in advance when and where to enrol them, visit schools, find out if they need inoculations.
- Most information can now easily be found on the internet. Expat forums can help with advice. For example if you consider France check out [www.anglofrance.net](http://www.anglofrance.net) or [www.webvivant.com](http://www.webvivant.com)

### WHEN YOU ARE THERE:

- Be flexible, patient and open-minded. Your new country does things differently and bureaucracy exists everywhere.
- Make sure you know the laws. Remember you are a foreigner with duties and rights.
- Make an effort to go out there and meet people. Charity work or joining the local journalist union can be useful.
- Make contacts with the local PR agencies and get on their mailing lists if you intend to write about your new country.

possibilities for freelancers in America are endless.

Emmet writes for *ZiffDavis publications*, [www.themodernword.com](http://www.themodernword.com) and others. He is also working on a comedy film script for *Cenozoic studios*. The pay rate for journalism work is much better in America according to Emmet and this is not the only difference he found. "I find American editors are more open to new ideas and writers than their Irish and English counterparts, which may have something to do with the relative classlessness of American society," he explains.

"I love the opportunities, the friendliness and openness of American people and of course the cheap prices."

Though he loves his new home country he misses Ireland and keeps in touch with friends and family via phone and email. He catches up with Irish news and culture via internet watching RTE TV. "I miss having a cultural context within which I can understand 99 per cent of my environment—that is just not possible in a country as diverse as the US." His advice to everyone wanting to move to the States: "Be open-minded about American people. I know some Europeans who don't give the place a chance and end up miserable as a result."

**LIFE IN IRELAND:** "I fell in love with a lovely Irish woman and had been wanting to move away from Britain for a while. I had grown disillusioned with the British media after witnessing the propaganda machine whine into gear over Iraq," says Frank

Coles about leaving Wales.

After conducting a long distance relationship for a year he finally moved to Ireland in June 2004. Preparing for the move was straightforward. As Ireland is part of the EU he did not need a work permit but sorting out his car turned out to be a bit of a nightmare. "The car is now just sitting out front gathering dust as the tax and insurance for vehicles in Ireland is extortionate. The system over here makes it not worth keeping a car more than 10-years-old."

Tax is generally a big issue in Ireland. "Everything is taxed from ATM's and pints, to chewing gum and carrier bags!"

Frank used to work in Film and TV and his speciality is research. He had no difficulties finding work in Ireland and writes for *Ireland on Sunday*, *Forma Magazine* and *Construct Ireland* among others. However life in Ireland is not cheap, especially property prices. "Ireland is supposedly now richer per capita than the States and according to *The Economist* a desirable place to live. I find prices are on a par with London."

Frank misses the British sense of humour, the Welsh hills, his friends and family and "comfy cafes", but he has the sea outside his front door and he loves kayaking up the East Coast. "The Guinness is great, St Patrick's day a hoot, the seafood is excellent and the freedom from the Orwellian drone of British media is wonderful." It looks like he is determined to stay. ■