

Relocating Internationally During COVID-19: Brew City To Lion City, And The Colorado Rockies To The Swiss Alps

As Global Mobility professionals, we all know the logistics of moving expatriates from A-B, but none of us have ever faced managing international relocations during a global pandemic. We'd like to share our personal international relocation experiences over the past six months, in hopes that it will offer advice if you are currently relocating your expatriate colleagues during this global pandemic.

Arrival And Quarantine In Singapore

Like so many others planning to move or travel internationally last year, 2020 required us to adapt and adjust our international expansion plans. As a result, my personal and professional move to Singapore was postponed by about six months. Instead of moving in June, I did not arrive in Singapore until the end of December. As you may know, Singapore had enacted strict procedures for allowing travellers into the country to minimise the spread of COVID-19 within the city-state. This includes entry approval requests, PCR testing and mandatory quarantines. Preparing for my flight and the subsequent quarantine was both daunting and stressful, but while there are many requirements, Singapore does have a system

in place to make arrival and quarantining a smooth process.

As we know, anytime you are moving your expatriate employees internationally for work, having all necessary documentation in order is crucial, and even more important now since many additional documents are required. All my documentation was presented and reviewed countless times from airport check-in, to transfer, to my quarantine hotel.

Once I arrived at my designated quarantine hotel where I would be spending the next 15 days, much of the worry I had regarding the experience dissipated as I was lucky in my hotel assignment. I could put my worst-case scenario fears to rest. I was assigned a room with large windows overlooking the Singapore River, a small desk with a chair, and enough floor space for a yoga mat. Much better than some posts in various Facebook groups led me to expect.

Not that spending 15 days in one hotel room is easy or an experience I look forward to repeating any time soon, but the hotel staff did a phenomenal job taking care of me during my stay. The Wellness staff called daily just to check in and see how I was doing and if I needed anything. The hotel also organised virtual events and activities for those in quarantine including a New Year's Eve Zoom party; towel folding competitions; Singapore themed crossword puzzle; and exercise/yoga classes.

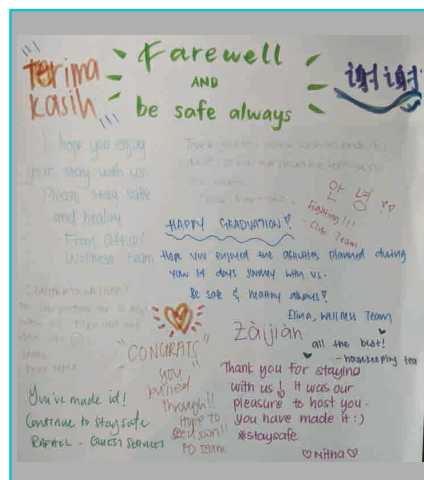
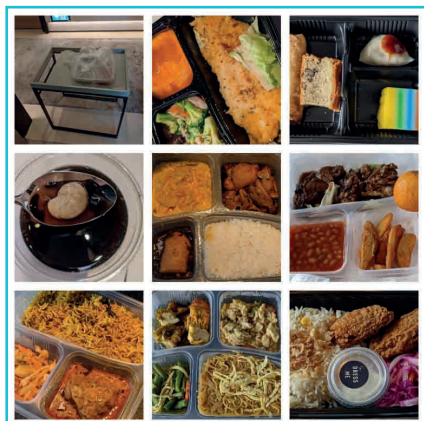
I know that everyone's quarantine experience will be different, but here are some tips that helped me through mine:

- Manage your expatriates' expectations – do not expect a 5-star hotel experience, even if staying at a 5-star hotel
- Take your own cutlery – I do not know why, but having something other than plastic utensils was very nice
- Pack snacks – we were served three meals a day, but it was nice to have some snacks
- Take things to do – books, puzzles, knitting, drawing, whatever you enjoy doing to help pass the time and break up the days
- Be prepared for it to get hard – I compared my stay to a CrossFit workout: the first third is not bad, you are confident and motivated; the second third is painful, and you may want to give up; but the final third gets easier as the end is in sight
- Stay in contact with family and friends – video calls/texting were great distractions from feeling stuck or isolated without any direct human contact in days.

For anyone planning to travel internationally who will be required to quarantine, know that you are in good company and that you can do it! Taking some time to prepare can make a world of difference!

Making It Home

Unpacking my suitcases for the last time and stocking my fridge were relatively small tasks, but doing those things made me feel more grounded and comfortable than I have been since leaving Wisconsin in late October. I did not realise that I was carrying an extra layer of tension or discomfort until it melted away by feeling at home again. The past few months have been an incredible adventure and opportunity. I am very thankful for going to both Switzerland and Singapore for WHR's international expansion, but it has not been without its challenges. After a while, living in temporary apartments and hotels got wearing and the thought of having to pack and unpack yet again was daunting. These feelings motivated me to secure my long-term housing, truly unpack and get settled. While I knew I was ready to feel less transient and more like I was actually



living in Singapore, I did not expect to feel such a difference so quickly upon moving into my new home.

I now feel like I am more in control of my day-to-day life and can focus on establishing a healthy routine. By having a home base, I feel ready to go out and start exploring this amazing new country and all the great things it has to offer. None of this is to say that you cannot do these things while in temporary housing, you certainly can, and I did to some extent. However, when you can customise your space, it relieves some of the mental and emotional burden of moving and starting over in a new city or country.

One specific example that had more of an impact on me than I anticipated was putting up some pictures from home. Before I left, I printed photos of my fiancé and I from various trips and events to have with me while living apart. Getting frames and putting the pictures around the apartment has been amazing. Not only does it make the space feel more like my own, but it also makes me feel less alone seeing these photos; they bring a smile to my face throughout the day. This project cost no more than \$20 for the prints and frames, yet so impactful on my mental and emotional health!

Another example was stocking my fridge and pantry with some staples I know I will use (and know how to use) to make familiar meals. I did a large grocery order and had it delivered the day I moved in so I could stock up all at once. I made a point to pick out a few things that would remind me of home, even if in a small way. Singapore is a foodie's heaven, and I have tried many delicious new things, but there is something comforting about knowing you can create familiar foods without too much effort.

Moving internationally has been a great experience so far, and I have enjoyed experiencing new countries, but being able to make somewhere feel like home again can go a long way!



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JENNY'S RELOCATION FROM THE US TO SWITZERLAND (DECEMBER 2020)

The Colorado Rockies To The Swiss Alps

As a Mobility professional, my role is to support people relocating internationally. In mid-December, I took on a new role at WHR Group's Basel, Switzerland, office and embraced the task of relocating myself, my husband, and our animals from Colorado, USA, to Basel, Switzerland. This was pre-Brexit and mid COVID-19 pandemic.

A dual UK/US National, I had certain advantages over my fellow American compatriots. Using my UK passport, I was still permitted to enter and work legally in Switzerland by registering with the Swiss authorities prior to the December 31, 2020, Brexit transition deadline.

The first challenge was finding a flight to Switzerland. Restrictions meant there were limited international flights, primarily from larger airports and even those were often cancelled due to changing restrictions. My travel plans changed due to the Swiss government introducing new quarantine laws the day before my planned arrival.



Once my flights were confirmed via London's Heathrow Airport, I had to complete a Passenger Locator Form 48-hours before traveling. This caused confusion as it was unclear whether this was required for all passengers or just those entering the UK. It was required for all travellers and must be completed with QR code provided to airline staff at check-in and pre-boarding. At that time, no PCR test or other documentation was required but this has since changed.

My check-in experience at the Colorado airport was painless, with the usual presentation of documents. Staff were naturally doing a double check of all required documents for international travellers and entry requirements including:

- US Passport
- UK Passport
- Passenger Locator form.

My route involved a short layover in Dallas before I boarded my flight to London. In Dallas, every passenger had to get their documents checked again to ensure they were eligible to travel. As I was transiting on to Zurich, I was pulled aside for further verification, showed my UK passport, told to put my US passport away and was allowed to board a very full flight.

There was not much difference on this flight compared to travel pre-Covid, except everyone wore masks (some face shields, gloves and even some Hazmat suits), for the duration of the flight. There was still a meal, drink service (with more individual packaging), and the usual entertainment options.

Heathrow Airport was very quiet; however, most stores and restaurants were open. This was great for a homesick expat. My final leg, London to Zurich, was full of UK Nationals heading to Switzerland for Christmas skiing holidays. This flight passed quickly, and I was soon landing on the outskirts of Zurich and trying to remember my German!





Life In Basel - Two Weeks In!

For me, this is not the first time I have relocated internationally, however, moving internationally in December 2020 was quite different. From this current experience, my suggestions to others are:

- Be flexible
- Join your local expat Facebook groups
- Exercise - it is good for your physical and mental health
- Use the employee support services available
- Use professionals: Tax, Immigration and Relocation Management Companies. The landscape is changing quickly, so it is key to have SMEs on your side.

In the 10 days since I arrived in Basel, I've been exploring this city on the Rhine, remembering my German and embracing my European roots! I spent the weekend hiking, and I started my registration and house hunting process with my Destination Service Provider.

During the weekend of December 18, UK authorities announced they had identified a new mutant strain of the coronavirus. Subsequently, many countries introduced travel bans on UK residents, including Switzerland. At the same time, flights and ferries were cancelled stranding thousands of people around the world.

Switzerland applied back dated quarantine requirements to all travellers who came from the UK starting December 14. When I landed on December 13, I was exempt. The Swiss authorities then removed freedom of movement from UK Nationals, ahead of the Brexit transition deadline.

On Tuesday morning, I had registered with the Swiss authorities. As a UK citizen this was straight forward with all relevant documents submitted to the registration office. The entire process took about 30 minutes. It was quick, easy and the staff was helpful. I was required to provide a photo for my resident card, which all foreign residents now receive, however, non-EU citizens need to provide fingerprints too.

On Tuesday night, I was alerted that the Basel Council had issued updated guidance

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on UK Nationals and Brexit; I sent a note to our immigration counsel to see if this impacted me. Wednesday afternoon I received an urgent call from them instructing me to issue revisions to my documents submitted to the Swiss authorities. I duly acted on this and was able to get the submission in before Christmas. This again highlights the need to have SMEs – in this case, immigration counsel on your side who can support through changing circumstances.

Two months in and I have my Swiss residence card and applied for my husband's Swiss Visa. My relocation is very much ongoing, especially when I compare myself to my colleague in Singapore who is already in permanent accommodation. However, I remind myself that our circumstances are very different.

I have experienced a full range of emotions during this relocation. These have ranged from excitement at my new role, anxiety at Brexit and COVID-19 rules, to loneliness at being in a new country unable to meet business or personal contacts. My family and I are excited to return to Europe; however, the post-Brexit, Covid ravaged Europe to which I have returned is not an easy place to be. I have relied on the support of family and friends, and also reached out to the Employee Assistance line provided by our health provider. The ability to speak to someone without judgement about my struggles during this time has been invaluable.

My point is that it is critical for companies to support their employees. In terms of practical support, such as extending temporary housing when lockdown means home searches can no longer take place, to ensuring they have access to resources supporting their mental wellbeing during this time, such as Employee Assistance Plans.

Relocating internationally in normal circumstances is stressful enough, without doing it mid-pandemic. Companies need to recognise this and support their employees and dependents accordingly. Be flexible and remember, we are human.



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ABOUT WHR GROUP, INC.

WHR Group, Inc. (WHR) is a privately owned, client-driven global relocation management company distinguished by its white glove service delivery structure and cutting-edge, customer focused proprietary technology. WHR has offices in Basel, Switzerland, Singapore and Pewaukee, Wisconsin, USA. International offices serve clients' global needs with 24/7 availability providing pre-assignment, transition, on assignment and repatriation services to multi-language expatriates. With a 100% client retention rate for the past decade, WHR continues to position itself as the trusted provider in global employee relocation. To learn more about WHR, visit <http://www.whrg.com> or follow @WHRGroup on LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook.