

## Tips for new players

Whether travelling on a study tour or embarking on a longer expedition to work in-country on an international development (foreign aid) project, there are lots of traps for newcomers.

Craig Boaden has pulled together a few pointers for those just starting out, gained firsthand through his work as an information manager at the AusAID Centre for Pacific Development And Training in the 1990s and through participation in several short term international development missions to southern Africa, Samoa, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands. Here are his top tips for embarking on your big adventure:

### Find out about the culture before going

This is obvious - what is less obvious is that you will have to unlearn and modify some of that information during your stay. Be flexible and be prepared to find that some developing societies are changing faster than many developed countries.

### Go with humility

Don't go in as a missionary or a teacher (unless of course that's your job!). Don't assume the West is best – it ain't necessarily so. You are in-country to provide help and another perspective, and you will be valued for your contribution and yourself. Expect to learn as much as anyone else in the team, maybe more. Be open to new friends and colleagues, new work situations, new experiences, and new ways of looking at things. These are some of the greatest intangible joys of working in another culture. When I first arrived in Samoa, I tore around at the same speed I did at home, grumbling under my breath at the road conditions. Eventually I realised I wasn't in a tearing hurry and didn't need to speed everywhere. So I slowed right down, and enjoyed the country much more.

### Be respectful and patient

Other countries' cultures may look on time and 'progress' in a different way to what you might be used to. In many developing countries there is a consensual decision-making culture evolved over centuries to acknowledge everyone and minimise conflict. Take heed of what is accepted and expected. If it's too slow for you - tough luck! It is you who'll need to change; don't expect other people to 'see the light'.

### Modify your expectations

They're called 'developing countries'. That can mean a range of things, but in general, you should expect to be working with fewer resources, of all types, than you had at home. This can be frustrating if you let it get to you. However, you'd be surprised what can be done with what's at hand. And you may be able to identify extra sources of funding or other assistance. Many challenges will take a long time to solve, but every little helps. For example, training is an important and ongoing issue, which nevertheless can be improved with better sharing of ideas or on the job training, with no great influx of cash. Training includes mentoring, too. People in developing countries have a great ability to make do with what's at hand, which many Australians do too. Use what you have to its fullest before wishing for something better. And remember, 'development' does not always equal 'growth'.

### Watch out for cultural misunderstandings

Some of these will occur in any case. The important thing is to react positively when they do happen and move on with no hard feelings. There are ways to minimise mishaps. For example, in some societies it is considered impolite to tell someone 'no'. This can lead to misunderstandings. Therefore, don't ask for agreement, ask instead what others think, or want to do, or present a number of options everyone can comment and reach consensus on. Patience is useful in these situations.

### Get to know the country and its people

Try to meet and mix with people from the country in which you work, and not just those with whom you work. This can be difficult but is very worthwhile and enjoyable. Don't spend all your spare time with the expat community; after all, if you wanted to meet more Australians there are heaps of them right here. See if your employer would allow you to do some touring around the country – it will help you in your work and is very interesting and enjoyable too. And ask your colleagues to show you around.

### Have fun!

Above all, have fun, learn a lot, make a contribution and use the experience to enrich your life.

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### And Laurie Urane, currently travelling, emailed inCite some more very practical advice for those contemplating a study tour overseas:

- Try to get your employer's backing for your trip and arrange to reciprocate any extra leave without pay or other support by providing a published report of your trip, presentations to staff etc
- Check out the international conference schedule and if you can time your travel to take in one (or more) of these, make the most of the opportunities. If you are headed towards Europe, the British Council and Goethe Institute are very helpful
- Prepare a detailed itinerary and check that you will actually have time to get from point A to point B in your schedule - cluster visits if you can, it helps a lot with time management
- Make contact before you leave with everyone you will be meeting and talking to, and doublecheck those commitments before you leave
- Arrange your accommodation ahead of your departure
- Check all visa requirements and get travel insurance
- If your trip is part holiday, part work or study, make sure you know what you can claim and keep your receipts for expenses plus a detailed travel diary because your accountant will need this to claim for you
- Write your report as you go and take pictures to go with it – this makes it much easier to complete reports when you get home and helps you remember everything

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### Resources

The Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) website [www.ausaid.gov.au](http://www.ausaid.gov.au) is a good source on official Australian overseas development assistance (ODA), and has good country resources too.

Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) (2005), *Australian aid: Volunteering through the aid program*. <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/publications/pdf/volunteering.pdf>

Australian Library and Information Association Asia and Pacific Special Interest Group. <http://www.alia.org.au/groups/apsig/>

Australian Volunteers International (AVI), *What we look for in a volunteer*. <http://www.australianvolunteers.com/volunteer/what-we-look-for.aspx>

Ludlow, Margaret (2005), *Guidelines for Hosting Work and Study Placements and Undertaking International Development Assistance Placements*, Institute of Public Administration Australia. [http://www.ipaa.org.au/\\_dbase\\_upl/Work%20placement%20guide.pdf](http://www.ipaa.org.au/_dbase_upl/Work%20placement%20guide.pdf)

Volunteering for International Development from Australia (VIDA), *What qualifications do I need?* <http://www.vidavolunteers.com.au/volunteer-with-vida/quals>