

TAKING THE OVERSEAS ROUTE

The number of Singaporeans residing abroad has climbed 24.8 per cent over the past 10 years. The latest population statistics show that 214,700 Singaporeans lived overseas last year, compared with 172,000 in 2007.

IN spoke to some of these Singaporeans and permanent residents who have been working overseas in Asian countries for at least two years, and finds out their reasons for doing so.

A CHANCE TO TRAVEL

Mr Edwin Chong chose to work overseas thinking it would be a good opportunity to travel – he was right.

In his 3½ years with the company, the 33-year-old senior manager with Branded Lifestyle, an Asia-based fashion retailer has lived in at least six places – China, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia.

He joined Branded Lifestyle after a nine-month management programme while completing his Masters of IT in Business (Analytics) at Singapore Management University.

He is responsible for corporate projects related to data analytics and customer relations management at the company.

"I joined Fung Group (the parent company of Branded Lifestyle) because I wanted to experience a different living environment and working culture," he said.

Working for a global conglomerate also offered chances to live and work in various countries, he added.

At the same time, it would be a good opportunity to travel and explore new places.

For Mr Chong, being able to speak Mandarin was not enough – people in Singapore, China and Taiwan used different terms to refer to the same things, and there were always local dialects to contend with.

At the beginning, his command of the Chinese language was not strong, but using it daily helped him to improve very quickly.

"Thankfully, all my colleagues have been very helpful and they are always happy to explain terms I'm not familiar with," he said.

Conducting business with people from so many countries has helped him build connections which comes in handy when planning cross-country training programmes, he said.

But despite all that, he still enjoys being in Singapore best. He recently moved back here to settle down with his wife, whom he met in Shanghai.

MORE ROOM TO GROW

Six years ago, Ms Junel Che decided to work overseas because she wanted to get out of her comfort zone and see what the world had to offer.

She landed in Japan, where during her first week at work, Ms Che, 32, had to use Google Translate to figure out the pronunciation of the word "nail" in Japanese. Then, she was a project manager for an exhibition construction company trying to communicate with her colleagues.



Above: Mr Edwin Chong (fourth from right) out on the weekend with his colleagues in China.

Right: Ms Geraldine Dreiser is the vice-president of marketing at YTL Hotels and is based in Kuala Lumpur.

While this might seem like a simple task to a native speaker of the language, Ms Che understood only conversational Japanese.

Despite struggles like these, she refused to throw in the towel. She diligently practised speaking and writing Japanese and is now fluent in the language.

The self-proclaimed mother of two cats now juggles being a freelancer and business owner.

As a social media consultant for clients such as Sony and BAKE Inc, she is responsible for the companies' branding and social media presence. This involves coordinating photo shoots of products and conceptualising advertisements.

She also co-founded CAT-CH – an interior design company that makes homes feline-friendly by using suitable furniture and making sure cats have sufficient space to climb – with her husband and two friends last year.

She had also worked as a digital marketer but two years ago, she decided to go freelance for its freedom and flexible working hours.

The Japanese culture of respecting one's elders meant that employees had to take orders from their bosses with no questions asked.

"Working for myself allowed me to talk and discuss with clients on the same level and forget about the top-down relationship between



Zan Sam speaks to four people who are working abroad and loving it



Above: Ms Junel Che is a social media consultant and business owner based in Japan. She also conducts art, craft and watercolour workshops.

Left: Mr Victor Wong has been working in Shanghai since he graduated from the National University of Singapore in 2012.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF EDWIN CHONG, COURTESY OF JUNEL CHE, COURTESY OF VICTOR WONG, YTL HOTELS

the boss and employee," she said.

The working culture also differed from Singapore in terms of the goals people had.

The Japanese do not aim to earn a lot of money or to be promoted quickly, but want "yari-gai", Ms Che, who has a Japanese husband and two children, said. It loosely translates into a sense of satisfaction and pride, which she respects immensely.

Working in Japan is not easy, she said. There are many talented illustrators and creative folk that "it's almost like a massive dog fight" when it comes to winning new projects. Trying to fit in as a minority in Japan's society also made her reflect on how Singaporeans look at foreign labour or talent.

"We can be quite harsh sometimes, and it's unfair to those who just want to make a living."

FULLFILLING A DREAM

After graduating from National University of Singapore with a bachelor's degree in real estate in 2012, Mr Victor Wong, now 31, went off to Shanghai, where he works in the China arm of Singapore real estate company Mapletree.

A year prior to his graduation, he had completed a two-month internship in the Xi'an office to earn course credits.

Upon graduation, he was offered a full-time job as an executive in asset management.

"At that time, China was developing quickly and there were many real estate projects which

got me quite keen on visiting them personally," he said.

Furthermore, working overseas was always on his bucket list.

Overseas work opportunities were not as common then and he felt it would be a unique opportunity.

The working culture in Shanghai is much like Singapore's, in terms of professionalism and work efficiency.

However, while work is a priority, employees are also treated as family. There are monthly birthday celebrations and family day outings organised by the human resource department, he said. This builds camaraderie among colleagues which can improve work morale.

His favourite part of the job is watching the country develop.

For example, more than five mega-malls (think the size of Vivocity) opened in Shanghai in the last two years alone. This created more opportunities and choices for tenants and shoppers, he said.

He added: "From the perspective of someone working in China, there is much to see, do and learn!"

FINDING HER GROOVE

Juggling an executive-level role in a multinational company and being a mother of two may seem challenging, but it's all in a day's work for Ms Geraldine Dreiser.

The 35-year-old is based in Kuala Lumpur, where YTL Hotels is headquartered.

As the vice-president of marketing, Ms Dreiser oversees public relations and marketing communication efforts for the hotel group, from brand positioning to digital advertising and media coverage.

She used to work for Singapore Airlines and American Express, but it is her current role that took her overseas.

It is her fourth year with the company, and she is enjoying it thus far.

Despite its main office being in Kuala Lumpur, the company has a global presence with at least six hotels in the United Kingdom, Japan, Thailand and Malaysia.

With two upcoming hotels in the UK, she can foresee longer days ahead. However, people do not bury themselves in work in Malaysia. "I find society here less high-strung and less stress-filled and the pace in general is not as fast," she said.

A much more obvious entrepreneurial spirit exists in the marketplace as well, she added. The people she works with are always full of ideas and fresh perspectives, she said.

"They also feel less restricted and that probably leads to more creativity."

It has also given her insight into a new market and innovative ways to problem solving. "After four years living in KL, there are still parts I have yet to discover. I enjoy the space and the ability to travel out of the city to other areas of the country to get inspiration," she said.