



Of Culture Shocks and Cows

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Daily realities such as heat, dust, pollution, power failures and crumbling infrastructure can be quite a challenge.

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Olav Sande's biggest problem in adjusting to life in India has been in pronouncing local names—of both people and places—since he arrived in the country from Oslo, Norway, in August to oversee the western Indian operations of mobile phone firm Uninor Wireless Pvt. Ltd. He is taking it one name at a time.

“Initially, when we were recruiting a lot of people, every single name was new to me so that was a bit of a learning experience,” the 48-year-old recalls. “Then I decided I will focus only on the first name, because if I try to pick up both the names, then I am lost.”

From things as small as pronunciation of local names to the heat and dust, the sight of cows and elephants ambling lazily on crowded city streets to more frustrating issues such as a deficient public infrastructure and bureaucratic red tape, India can indeed be a challenge for expatriates.

“You think life is normal, and then you’re confronted by a cow” is how Charlotte Walter, a Briton whose husband runs Delhi-based outdoor adventure firm Flying Fox, puts it.

An increasing number of foreigners moving to the country to take up jobs with local firms or joint ventures such as Uninor are learning to cope with such daily realities of India, but it can be tough adjusting.

“While attracted by the furious growth of our economy and the chance for a rich and diverse experience, expatriates can be daunted by the state of Indian infrastructure,” says executive search firm Amrop

India in a report on expatriates in Indian companies. Family adjustment to India can be a daunting hurdle in the way of relocating to a job in the country. Most companies are sensitive towards the need to help expat employees and their families be inured to India, but an organized approach seems to be lacking, says Amrop. “Think again if you believe the family is the person’s issue,” it says in a list of 10 factors that gear companies well for hiring expats. “It could be an asset or a problem that is best recognized early.”

Coping with India

To be sure, some expatriates cope much better with the India they encounter outside of their workplace. For instance, Sande, who says he comes from a “country of 4.5 million, as big as Pune”. He has been appointed to his post by Norwegian telecom firm Telenor ASA, which holds 67% in Uninor, with the remaining owned by the Indian partner Unitech Ltd.

It helped that Sande had the support of his company, one of the newest entrants to the burgeoning Indian telecom sector, in moving. Before making the decision to relocate, Sande visited India with family—wife and four children. He has no problems with sweltering Mumbai. Coming from a sunstarved country, the Norwegian can’t get enough of the Indian sun.

“Kids are going to school here now, they have learnt English. It’s been like a start-up business for them as well,” says Sande who is no hurry to get back home. “For me it is exciting and the family is also doing good.” The biggest frustration expats experience typically is with India’s shabby infrastructure. In cities such as Bangalore, Mumbai and New Delhi, “the biggest problem they have is dealing with the inadequate infrastructure—power outages, getting around, electricity, phones, frustrations that come with that”, says Robert Broadfoot, founder and managing director of Hong Kong-based Political and Economic Risk Consultancy Ltd (PERC), which assesses trends in Asia.



Broadfoot says India ranked midway down the list of Asian countries in PERC's last survey on expat quality of life, taken five years ago.

"You love India or you hate it if you're an expat family," he says, referring to expatriate fondness for the local culture as India's biggest attraction.

Take Pamela Timms, a British journalist and writer, who relocated to Delhi from Scotland five years ago with her husband and three children. "We'd never encountered a power cut in our lives," she says. "It's frustrating if you're trying to do homework and suddenly you've got no power."

Rocketing costs

Foreigners even with a dollar income complain that the cost of living has been increasing and rentals have shot up, making it difficult to save in a country that had once been seen as a value-for-money proposition.

"It's not cheap," Timms says. "I imagine we're spending close to what we were spending in Britain. It's gotten much more expensive in last four years—everything from going to the cinema to going out to eat. There's not a huge difference between Britain and here anymore."

Ellen Weeren, who moved to Delhi from Washington, DC, last year with her husband, who works in publishing, and their three children, says that her family hadn't been able to put much money into savings during their time in India so far.

"I don't know anybody ho's saving any money living here," she says. "I've got three kids and we're getting (imported American snacks) Goldfish and Pringles, so we're paying three times as much for food." Even single, childless expats are feeling the pinch of costs.

"It depends on how you live," says Christine Agur from Toronto, a math teacher at Lancers International School in Gurgaon, on the southern outskirts of New Delhi. She saves money by living with two flatmates in a neighbourhood low on both expats and rent. "My salary is less here than in Canada," she says. "But if I take my holidays in India, it's fine."

Children's education is a problem for expat families as

school choices for foreign students are limited, with the lucky accepted few paying a hefty fee. Students often sit on a wait list at the American Embassy School, where annual tuition runs at \$16,830 (Rs7.67 lakh) per child for kindergarten through class V, and \$18,040 for children in classes VI through VIII.

"If we were back in England, I would have gone for our local state school—you have lots of options there. Here we're paying for two of our kids to go to British School, which adds up," says Walter, whose husband runs Flying Fox.

Pluses and minuses

Walter also frets about the effect the polluted air of the Capital has on the health of her children.

"I've got a number of friends whose children have asthma," she says. "I worry about heavy metals in the water and try to do everything as organic as I can. We put on the bug repellent and sunblock every time we go out. We sleep under mosquito nets. Now it just seems totally normal, but it was a huge lifestyle change when we arrived."

One advantage of working and living in India is the availability of plentiful and inexpensive household help for expats, who wouldn't have been able to afford cooks, drivers, cleaners and nannies back home in the West.

"Especially for women with younger children, the fact that you have help here makes a huge difference—you don't have to do all the ferrying around," Timms says. "I know a woman who's had three babies here in three years, because this is (where) you're going to get help."

Role of religion

The dominant role of religion and superstition in daily life—even at work—can take some getting used to. Sande, for instance, was told by neighbours when he moved into his house in Mumbai that he had to do a pooja (prayer) to seek divine blessings. Sande went and bought himself and his family members a kurta-pyjama set each for the occasion, and wears the outfit to a pooja that is performed whenever a new Uninor office opens.



Nigel Harwood, president and chief executive officer of InterGlobe General Aviation Pvt. Ltd, who has spent two decades in aviation and took the job at the invitation of the group's owner Rahul Bhatia, has picked up one lesson: papers for delivery of aircraft should be signed only on days when planetary alignments are auspicious.

Harwood simply informs aircraft manufacturers that the process can get somewhat delayed if the date is not auspicious and that's the way business is done in India.

He found that one way to adapt is to get used to frustrations such as time-keeping and service quality. For instance, a break-down in a direct- to-home TV service can take three weeks to repair and patience can be a virtue in such situations.

All the frustrations apart, most expats say India is a difficult country to quit. Harwood, for instance, says he considers India his permanent home.

"I actually really, really like it (here)," says Emre Sucu, a Turk who moved to the US in 1999 and graduated from the Kellogg School of Management in 2007, then opted to work in India as part of an internal programme at Boston Consulting Group.

"It takes longer to get to places, your phone sometimes work, sometimes doesn't depending on where you are; but nothing really is a deal-breaker," says Sucu, who has been collecting Indian things, including a big statue of Ganesh, the god invoked by many Indians at the start of every project.