What My Epic Expat Failure Taught me

Lessons disguised as hard knocks

When planning to move abroad we never know how it will turn out. There are moments in life when it is a far cry from what we expected or planned. Yet, does it mean we are an expat failure?

In a world where anything is possible. Where happiness, success and riches are the name of the game – and is what most people strive for.

What do we do when reality throws us more than a curve ball? When reality walks up and slaps us in the face with a slimy dead fish before it kicks the feet out from under us.

Not all moves abroad and adventures end in big success stories. Some grind us through painful lessons in the international school of hard knocks.

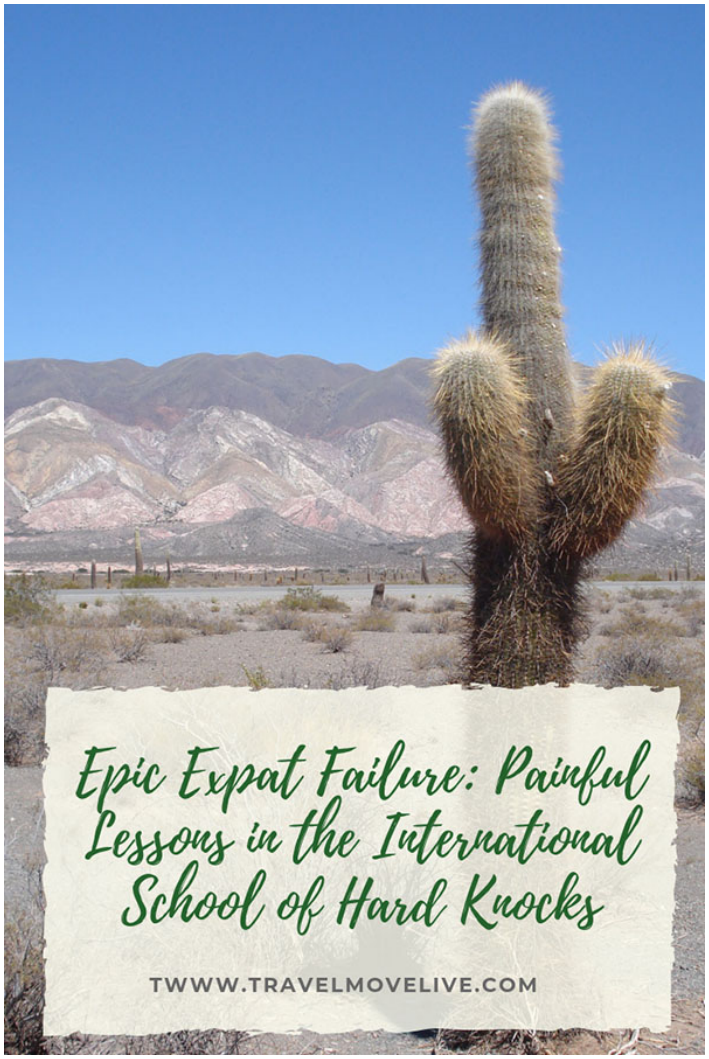
In a world where anything is possible, failure is possible too. Rather than deem it a failure, I'd rather file these under "big fat lessons" I learned along the way.

The icing on these lessons is that these are learnt in exotic places. In foreign strange languages, all while eating excessive amounts of ice cream. So in theory, these lessons earn buckets more kudos than lessons learned at home on the sofa.

Here are is one of my misadventures, and painful lessons I

learned the hard way. Lessons in accepting on of my short lived attempts to acclimatize and settle in abroad:

The Big Farewell



One fated evening many moons ago – I found myself in a deep discussion with a friend. I was in the middle of celebrating my final nights in London. New adventures on foreign shores were calling my name…

I was moving to China, and high on the possibilities. The big wide sea of possibilities that lay before me, like a blank page awaiting a scribbling pen.

Anything as always is possible.

In this conversation with 'Miss Wise' (alias used to protect the innocent), I found doubts streaming uncensored from my mouth. Could I do it, what if I failed? What if it didn't work out? What if I had to face all these friends again after such a big going away party.

Her oh so – wise words – echo still in the recesses of my mind. They come up to join me on the odd occasion when doubt threatens to overwhelm me.

"Michelle, not one of the people here would be sorry to see you again – they'd welcome you back in a second".

She then went on to tell me a story. A sad story of a friend that had moved out to the Greek Islands with a big send off. When he got ill, he was too embarrassed to come home. And thanks to that pride and unwillingness to admit defeat he died there, alone. She made me promise if it wasn't working out, if I got sick, broke or unhappy to come back. Come back to where I would always be welcome.

Yet Timing is Everything

Later, as I recalled that fatal moment and the promises I made to her. It didn't make admitting my defeat and return any easier.

In retrospect, I should have heeded her words earlier. I hesitated, and as in love in war, those that hesitate are lost. Hence, I returned to London with no money. I spent the first day and night at the airport. Too broke, ashamed and devastated to even let anyone know I had returned. Too proud to ask for help.

Living in China wasn't the dream I had imagined. I found the language impossible to learn. People stared at me in the street. It was an alien world, and I was the alien.

A world that I could never integrate into. I would never feel at home in. Relegated to forever being an outsider.

The work promised to me was not at all what I thought it to be, my money ran out and the rest is history. The dream dissolved and turned into a nightmare. I couldn't make any of it work, nor could I leave the country.

I was stuck.

Time to Put your ego aside

I am even more ashamed at the lengths I had to go to, to leave the country. Which I am not going to recount for fear that it will give people ideas. But let’s say, a human angel lent a hand. They spoke to the airline, who then with great ado, repented and changed my ticket.

There are angels out there. It didn’t change the fact that life was tough for a while. So tough it would bend steel.

But hey, let’s get real, everyone somewhere at sometime has had moments like these. It is these moments that define us. We don’t wallow, we recognize it, suck it up, and get on with it.

You can deal with the fall out later.

At what we’ll call the end of the saga, my friend in all her wisdom was right. My friends were happy to see me and after a few initial setbacks, surrounded by my friends, life went on.

I’ve gone on to live through many more sagas. I have lived in many countries, and failed many more times. I still find

myself onboard the roller coaster of an adventure we call life.

And while this self-inflicted disaster was what I would deem an epic FAIL (yes in capitals), I also learnt a lot:

Lesson 1: Research the Country you are Moving to

Just because you know your way around a Chinese menu, and you excel at the use of chopsticks doesn’t mean your going to be an expert in all things Chinese. It would have been useful if I had attempted to learn the language before going.

Investigated what city would have been more suitable. Looked into the quality of life, how to they see and relate to foreigners. There is so much you can look into and do, there are expat sites and forums, and so much you can find online.

In all honesty I was in China so long ago the internet… yes friends, it was that long ago. How the world has changed – and how much more I research now before I go!

Lesson 2: Getting the Timing right

This is an uber important lesson in life in general. Timing is everything and yet it is one of the toughest things to guesstimate.

Plan your finances. Calculate how much everything actually costs vs. how much you expected it would cost.

Moving to a new city, or country has a lot of upfront costs. From hotels, flats, and general living costs before you find or start a job. If you rent a flat, you'll need a deposit, a month up front, utility bills. These things can all add up and can be more than you planned for.

If you decide to leave earlier than expected and you have rented and apartment. You are also going to have to give notice, cancel utilities which takes time, and can often come at a price.

Be sure to keep track of it all.

Calculate of how long your money will last? Do you have a credit card you can use if needed, and do you have someone to help you out? What is the deadline for finding a job?

There is a certain amount of time that you have to make it work, know what it is and plan for it.

Life abroad in even the cheapest of places can cost more than expected. Keep an eye on where you are at in the journey and be prepared to time it right. Sitting down once and a while and reassessing the current status with a calculator and pen and paper is necessary.

That way, when or if the day comes that you realise it's not working out, and if all of your best laid intentions fail you'll have a plan:

Lesson 3. Have a plan B and be Flexible

Or C, or D – flexibility, adaptability are traits that come in handy. If you don’t find work, can you do a work exchange. If one city isn’t right is there any other one that might be more suitable.

Can you work online? stay with friends? there are always plenty of possibilities, and there are times we need to be more creative with our options and in uncovering what they might be.

If B, C, D fail is there another country nearby or can you move back home, in with friends, get a live in job or to a previous country you lived in?

Again anything is possible. Combinations and choices are infinite, be ready to turn on a dime deal with the situation head on as it arises.

Lesson 4: Is this the right culture for you?

While some Cultures might be Fascinating, it doesn’t mean you can live in them. For me, as a shy social recluse the idea of having everyone stare at me in the street is appalling. Which was part of the everyday in China.

The language was a big challenge. At the time it was unusual for Chinese and Westerners to mingle.

One of the things I like most about living in a new country is getting to know the culture. To learn the language and feel like a local. In China, at the time I found this a challenge.

I didn’t want to be an expat ‘EXPAT’, always a foreigner. When I live abroad I need to be able to feel at home.

It was a moment of self awareness when I realised how much I need to be able to settle in and feel at home. At the same time I recognised that would never happen in China the culture while interesting, wasn’t me.

Every End is a new beginning

There isn't really an end to our adventures, after one, another one soon follows. We continue along out path, be it quick, rich or educational.

I am not sure about you, but despite my epic fails. Of which my attempt to move to China was just one of many. It made my life richer, and somehow more lived.

And in the words of a one wise man, when I shared that all I wanted to do was to find a place to call home. He laughed and said:

'You're a wanderer, you travel, you live abroad it's what you do. Get used to it'.

Really, that's life isn't it? Accepting who we are, and where we are at in our journey.

Failure is all about how we define it. My moves are not failures but rich lessons, epic adventures, and all in all, make my life 'a life worth living'.

My message to you – if it's not working out: what lesson are you learning and what new adventure is waiting for you? and a brief reminder, that I mean it when I say:

"Anything is possible…"

p.s. If you are undecided about staying or going, check out these earlier posts on surviving your first year abroad, and about how to meet locals and make a foreign country feel like home.

Divine photos here are thanks to these incredible photographers:

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