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ING YOUR WAY HOME

For skilled South African expats scattered across the world, returning home can prove a lot tougher than leaving

BY JAZZ KUSCHKE

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OU'VE PACKED YOUR BAGS, SAID YOUR GOODBYES, ENJOYED THAT LAST COLD ONE with your mates. By now, you can't wait to actually get on the plane and start a new life – away from the crime, the ridiculous queues at Home Affairs and the parking attendant who is never there when you park, but always has his hand out when you leave. Pilot, start your engines, you say – 'cause you don't ever want to come back to the land the rainbow forgot. But then you do – all thanks to some crazy bankers in America who helped send the entire world into economic meltdown. So, how exactly do you bounce back from this? Turn over and find out.

JOHANNES VAN DYK NEVER PLANNED TO RETURN when he boarded an Air Singapore flight for New Zealand in February 2006. Once over there, he thrived on South Africa's bad publicity because "it justified my decision to take my children away from their family and friends. I wanted to see

South Africa fail in all aspects so I could rub it in the noses of those who crucified me for leaving." The grass wilted pretty quickly for Van Dyk, though. And, in his case, the crazy bankers were only partly to blame.

"It was only greener on the other side because of the 1 800mm of rain," muses Van Dyk about the Land of the Long White Cloud. The younger of his two sons developed life-threatening asthma as a result, forcing the Van Dyks to uproot once again.

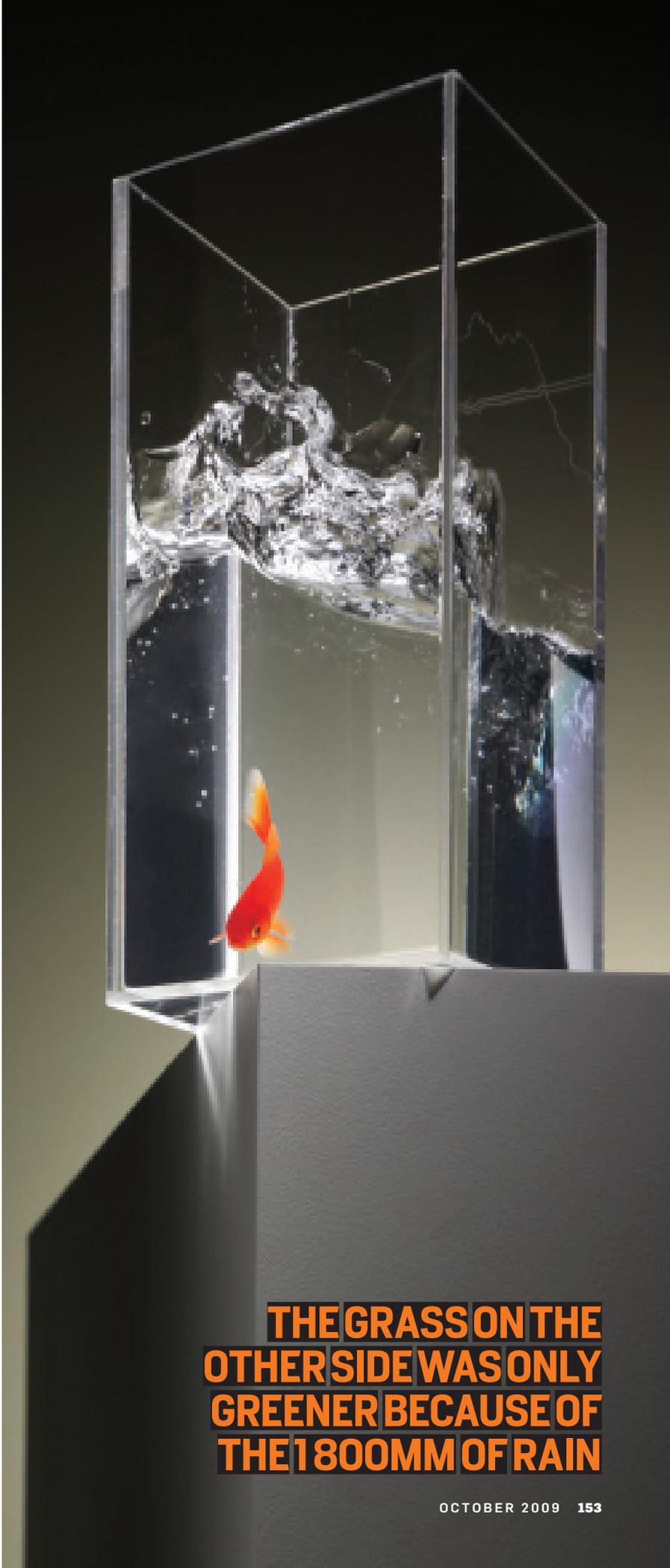
In July 2007 they moved across the Tasman Sea to Perth, the "little South Africa" in Australia. They found the people much friendlier than in New Zealand, especially the expat South Africans. (In New Zealand they had verbally abused his wife for being a stay-at-home mom, a choice that had never posed a problem in South Africa.) It still took them six months to settle into the new country's system. "Connecting telephone lines, setting up broadband, getting to know your way around town, finding out where the shops are and learning how brands compare to those in South Africa didn't happen easily," says Van Dyk.

After four months working as a sales representative for a fertiliser company in Australia, he was promoted to state manager of West and South Australia, meaning that he had six reps reporting to him. "In Australia they valued my experience and skills more than my qualifications," he says.

But the combination of an unscrupulous employer who jeopardised his work visa, and the credit crunch, put him out on the street – and on his way back to South Africa.

Making a big move for the third time in as many years was tough, but returning to a country some felt he'd forsaken made it doubly traumatic. "It was more difficult to settle back in South Africa than it had been in either New Zealand or Australia," says Van Dyk. "The crime is worse than when we left, the electricity grid is under immense pressure and there's a lot of political uncertainty." But his biggest concern was finding employment. "We returned without me having secured a job." He eventually found work with a local fertiliser company. "I had to step back to a lower position," he says. His circumstances have since improved – he recently landed a new, more senior position with another company.

Men's Health's resident psychologist Rafiq Lockhat believes that a change in thinking helped the Van Dyks cope. It's now just over a year since their return and Van Dyk has a job he's happy in, his children have settled at school and he and his wife's social calendar is filling up again. They've come to realise that South Africa's not actually a bad place to be after all. "There's a spirit of optimism now, where there was doubt a few months ago," Van Dyk says. "We had an excellent Super 14, hosted an extremely successful IPL 20 Twenty and Confederations Cup and the 2010 Soccer World Cup lies ahead."



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MARTINE SCHAFFER has heard every expat story there is to be told. As managing director of the online portal www.homecomingrevolution.co.za, her life revolves around helping South African expats adjust to coming home. She's been asked to deal with everything from getting a 34-foot yacht into South Africa, to helping someone scared their beloved labrador won't be allowed into the country after testing positive for a strange disease.

"We've seen a definite increase in the number of people coming home or planning to," says Schaffer. And while it's easy to assume this revolution is happening only because of the international financial situation, Schaffer is convinced it's a combination of things causing the "brain gain", the term for the flow of skilled people back into South Africa. "It's a considered decision, not just a

reaction to the current crisis," she says. "Helped, I think, by all the recent positive developments – peaceful elections, successful sporting events and prudent financial controls." Homecoming Revolution has conducted research over the past three years and has found the main reasons why people come back are always the same: family and friends, lifestyle and sense of belonging.

Not so for Van Dyk, however. And this explains why he initially struggled with the change. This, and his lack of job security. Organising employment before you return is crucial, advises Schaffer. "You want to know that you'll be financially secure and that there is career growth in the company you choose," she says. "But it's a bit of a catch-22 situation as most potential employers want a face-to-face interview." She suggests coming back to check out the situation before making a final decision. "Be patient and start planning stuff before you return."

GOT WHAT IT TAKES?

Men's Health's resident psychologist Rafiq Lockhat divides the possible psychological hurdles related to coming back into two categories

1. EXTERNAL FACTORS

> Animosity from those who stayed behind

Particularly your fellow workers who feel that you ran away. They don't care why you left, you were the rat who jumped what you thought was a sinking ship and now you've gone and jumped another ship.

> **The boss's expectations** There's often a mismatch between what the boss expects and what you can produce. He thinks because you've worked overseas you've been to the "promised land" and expects you to produce accordingly. The reality is that it's not that different working here. Normally it's tougher, in fact.

2. INTERNAL FACTORS

> **Your own expectations** What am I capable of doing?

> **Work rate** We have a much bigger and better work ethic here (also the reason why we're in demand over there).

> **Lower salaries** Here, on average, you won't make what you did there and might also have to start at a slightly lower job level.

> **Efficiency of systems** We still have certain glitches in our admin systems (most notably passports and driver's licences) that you just don't find in developed (First World) countries.

> **Lifestyle expectations and adjustments** Undeniably, crime is a problem and we have a poor public transport system. Access to the latest fashion, international bands and new movies can be limited.

NO ONE IS FORCING YOU TO MAKE THE CHOICE, SO JUST GET ON WITH IT. THERE IS NO MAGIC FORMULA



T PROFESSIONAL GARETH

Knight returned after seven-and-a-half years in the UK. He found the transition tricky but not as painful as the Van Dyks. Why? Knight, you see, always planned to eventually come home. After a recent holiday in the country he knew the time was right both business- and lifestyle-wise.

As with most Internet-based organisations, the project he is helping to head up here has a multinational team. "The cost of people (labour) in South Africa is less than London, so it makes sense to have some costs based in the UK and as many as possible in South Africa," he says.

The trifecta that Schaffer mentioned – family and friends, lifestyle and sense of belonging – also prompted his decision. "My parents are in Somerset West and I want to spend more time with them. That and I met a great girl who happened to live in Johannesburg, so it made a lot of sense to come back."

He's had his frustrations, though. Knight feels he's coming back to make a valuable economic contribution and this should be recognised by the government. "There needs to be some sort of assistance around starting again," he says. "So that you can actually do something productive instead of untying red tape." But he realises the only way to deal with the sticky bureaucratic stuff, or any other change-type situation, is to attack it with the right attitude. "No one is forcing you to make the choice, so just get on with it. Don't think that there's a magic formula."

Yes, coming back can be a lot harder than leaving in the first place. But think about sitting in your back garden, frosty in hand, braaing while you wait for the big game to start, and it suddenly all makes sense, doesn't it? **MH**



SKILLED EXPATS ARE TURNING THE TIDE AND RETURNING TO SOUTH AFRICA

PLANT NEW ROOTS

Successfully settled after seven-and-a-half years in the UK, here are Gareth Knight's top practical tips for coming home

1. Figure out what you want to do before you come back, so you can start making contact with people in South Africa before you return.
2. Make sure you come back with enough cash to cover you for long enough to get settled or have an income ready to support you.
3. If you can, bring your car into South Africa instead of buying one here – cars are massively overpriced locally and the second-hand car market is very different to the UK.
4. Realise that you're coming back to a country that's not quite First World, but not quite Third World. This requires readjustment in thinking and expectations.

MIND THE GAP

So what about the good old two-year Euro stint?

Your brother did it and your cousin before him... Six months of pouring pints in a dodgy little pub or stacking fruit in a warehouse to make enough travel money to hit Portugal, Spain and France. Footloose, as they say, sort of fancy free – until the cash dries up and you're back behind the bar. This little cycle lasts until your two-year UK working visa runs out and you board that jumbo jet bound for OR Tambo armed with a 500 foreign Facebook friends, a passport full of stamps and a bit of a funny accent.

But with the abolishment of the traditional two-year UK working holiday visa and the current global economic situation, is it still a good idea (or even possible) to go overseas?

"It depends entirely on what the person wants to achieve," says Robbie Bense, director of Overseas Visitors Club (OVC). "Even though the UK no longer offers young South Africans the two-year working holiday visa, there are still a number of travel options and we see hundreds of young travellers going abroad after school to do casual work."

Bense believes that the global job market has definitely tightened and the best option open to those looking for overseas experience is to further their education abroad. "The UK and New Zealand governments are incentivising foreigners to study in their countries by offering them the opportunity of a work visa on graduation," he says.

So you might not be going over there for a jol, but perhaps that's not a bad thing. Do your homework properly and come back a better (qualified) man. "The global economy is favouring applicants with middle management skills and those candidates with overseas experience are hugely advantaged," says Bense.

If you are looking to pack your bags, check out www.ovc.co.za for assistance.