

# Working in a Foreign Country

## One Geologist's Experiences, Realizations and Advice

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The phone rings. The line crackles. "Hello. I'm calling from Timbuktu."

Timbuktu. Peru? It could be from anywhere in the world. It is your wake-up call: a job prospect in a foreign country. It is your opportunity to become an expatriate – not to be confused with ex-patriot. You're still free to pay taxes. In fact, on my first job I paid American and foreign taxes. Still, it was a financially lucrative and educational experience.

It is also a great way to rack up frequent flyer miles. Once I only dreamed of seeing the Nazca Lines, the pyramids, Machu Picchu, Angel Falls or Foz do Iguacu. Now, "I've been there, done that".

For me, working in foreign countries was a great career move. In this day when one's employment address changes with the seasons, working in foreign countries opens a much wider playing field for potential employment. When I went thru the corporate downsizing in 1992, I found six job openings nationwide for geologists and three of those were with a company that within six months chucked out all their geologists. The complete lack of hope for domestic employment forced me to look elsewhere and the elsewhere that worked was in the southern hemisphere, south of the border.

I had assumed there was no reason to go foreign because those countries probably generated all the geologists they needed through their universities. I was half wrong and therein was the key to my continued employment.

Make no mistake, foreign university graduates are some very well trained geologists. In my experience, what these new graduates lack, as do many practicing geologists is experience that they could not possibly have, because their countries have only recently been opened up to ideas and development. They can identify Prousite, but they do not know

how to do reconnaissance and they do not know how to manage a development drilling program. There is a real need for professionals experienced with implementing new ideas for exploration and development to provide that experience. From talking with engineers and metallurgists, the same probably holds true for their fields.

Note that there may be a built-in career booster with such employment here. The need is for experienced people to manage things. Had I survived all the changing of and disappearing of employment addresses, I would probably be just as proficient at logging chips and core and constructing sections. Since I didn't survive, I now have experience managing projects drilling up to 20,000 feet a month thru the pre-feasibility audit. I have acquired the language and cultural skills to work from Alaska to Argentina, which provides a much larger job catchment basin than Reno alone. Those language and cultural skills are extremely important to one's success and longevity in many foreign locations.

Still, working overseas is not for everyone. I've heard anywhere from half to 90% of Americans that venture out return within a year. There are some real negatives.

Like returning in a coffin. There is an undeniable element of danger. I have to admit that I was a bit taken back when one geologist in Peru told me, "I've been here two years and have met eight Americans. Three are still alive, including you and me." Granted, a truck load of American geologists driving off an Andean cliff at night made a dent in his Christmas card list. Looking back, my own personal experience includes having one acquaintance executed by the Sender Luminoso. I've been detained for a day by village vigilantes, rolled over at 4:30 AM to see a burglar walking by the bed with an arm full of things from the bathroom and been jumped by three guys

with pistols while parking the car at my house. My total loss through all of this was less than \$100. I lost far more when all the wedding gifts were stolen from my luggage passing thru the Caracas airport or when my wallet was lifted in the La Paz bus station as I started days off.

One of the hard parts of working overseas is accepting that you do stand out and are an easy and probably profitable target for stalking. Yet, if you let that control your life, you have constructed your own prison and become the off-kilter parody of a sane professional. One can be appropriately cautious and still be open to the great friendships that the world has to offer.

Illness is another issue. You're practically guaranteed to get sick — a lot sicker than tourist tummy. There are some serious bugs out there that your body has never seen. Drag those back with you and you'll probably end up paying a lot of money playing stump the American doctors. My experience is that it is better to go to a nearby city where the doctors know the local stuff and know how to treat it. Plus you can amuse your friends with stories about the natural curiosity of all the clinic nurses and even the receptionists who are given the opportunity to see a foreigner in a medical examining position. In time you even learn some local tricks. Always wear a woolen scarf around the neck in the high mountains and put plugs of wadded up toilet paper in the ears when bathing in the tropics.

A potentially sticky point is dealing with the nationals on a project. Your reception can range from respect for your experience to jealousy that you are there. When there are problems, one needs to remember that you're the new guy on the block. You cannot outplay them at their games and they have friendships going back long before your arrival. It is best to stick to what you were brought in to do: bringing professional experience

to bear on a project – and keep your options open.

The phone call from a potential foreign employer should make you think about all of those things and what you really want in life. Do you want travel and adventure? Would you have left coastal Virginia and walked across the North American continent in 1849? Its easy to say yes, but when you look around you realize that the people who pioneered Canada and the United States begat an awful lot of people that pretty much stayed put. Very few people are wanderers at heart. Human behavior is generally pretty rational and it is usually pretty hard to leave everything behind. Most who do, do so because they're in a personal situation where there's more to potentially be gained by moving on, and staying put doesn't look all that attractive. After all, there is some sense of foregoing that goes with the going.

Like foregoing American plumbing. The feeling is difficult to describe when you're standing in the shower all lathered and shampooed up and the water peters out. One quickly learns two things: wash thy body in sections and a pail of water in the shower is a beautiful thing. And, yes, do carry all the toilet paper you could possibly need folded up in a pants pocket.

Like foregoing good old American food. To the American palate, most foreign food ranges from kind of OK to getting your stomach pumped in reverse. You know those fuzzy animal slippers with the cute animal heads over the toes. Fry them up and you pretty much have the Andean delicacy *cuye* that looks back. *Casaba* tastes precisely like a paper napkin. One geologist noted, "I can see making an *arepa* one time by accident, but I sure as heck cannot see making it the national food."

That said, there are also some real advantages to local foods. Your dental cavity rate plummets. In many countries there are really rich selections of natural fruits and juices. To me, the richest of all is real, handmade whipped cream. When you've had those, you realize how lame are many of products on US market shelves.

In other ways, being overseas gives you a different perspective on American culture. In fact, watching American movies with subtitles is a help in learning a foreign language and a good way to measure your progress in mastering that language. First comes 90% comprehension during Sylvester Stallone movies

and later comes the more grammatically complex dialogue in, say, *Sesame Street*.

Some people fall naturally right into learning another language. I don't. I really have to work at learning another language. Still there are some fun parts. Like learning Spanish uses the same word for wives and handcuffs. Or realizing that languages fill a need to name things and some things are just a part of the human experience worldwide. Things like, say, brown nosers. They're called sock suckers (*chupamedias*) in Venezuela.

Indeed, on one level you find we're all in this together. Hang around with a family in an adobe house with a sheet metal roof and you'll probably find they're up at 6 AM cleaning the floors, sending their kids out with clean clothes and that they hurt when the family dog dies. Give them a little money and they'll buy a car, drive their kids to school and drive around the parking lot looking for the spot closest to the store door. Deal with a settlement for exploration access across to their communal lands and they'll present you with a wish list; better schools, better roads, better health care and a better future for their kids.

On another level, you find that we are different. The economy in many countries is incredibly informal. Commercial streets are crowded with people, litter, hawkers and serenaded by a cacophony of jaunty music blaring out from dueling ghetto blasters. Huge amounts of goods are sold by street vendors, kiosks and tiny, hole-in-the-wall shops. My favorites were two shops, about 12 by 12 feet, in *Bambamarca*, Peru, which sold only beer and toilet paper. I've always wanted to see their vision statement.

Some cultures just rest on a different foundation. Go at 9AM to a veterinarian's office that shows hours of 8:30 to 5:00 and you can join the line of people waiting for him. Which is better from the vet's standpoint. Show up at 8:30 and take people and their pets as they come in or show up at 11AM and have a waiting room full of people that are so glad to (finally) see him. My Iowa German upbringing leans towards the former. A whole lot of world operates on the latter. Everyone complains and uses an Army phrase about how their society works (or doesn't), but that is how they do it.

Those societies actually have a certain charm because they work on the basis of friendship, not some abstract idea of customer service. There is a saying in

Brazil: for my friends, anything; for my enemies, the law. Slip some chocolates to the vet's secretary or someone in the bank and pretty soon they will help you get your business done in a reasonable time.

There are other charming aspects. In the United States, we are raised to expect a certain orderly timetable to life. We expect to be students in our teens, have children in our twenties, raise them in our thirties and become grandparents in our forties. Life is ordered like the seasons and only dirty old men mess with that order.

But there is no natural law that life should be such. In a big part of the world, there are no seasons as we recognize them and life is disordered and is for anyone with the energy to jump in and enjoy. A 34 year-old driller was telling me once about talking with his girlfriend's 16 year old sister. He asked her what she thought about her sister going out with an older man. She gave him a blank look and said, "My boyfriend is 42." While it is a man's world, I've seen several examples of the same happening to women.

I fit a common Latin pattern when at age 50 and three days, Rosanna Gabriela Feyerabend Palomino was born in Venezuela of Peruvian and American stock. It is an entirely normal fate of *gringos* who wander south of the border. One Caracas columnist wrote that his Venezuelan daughter plays with his American grandchildren when he visits his kids in California. I think we all share a sense of amused disbelief that it is really happening to us. But it is and it is like getting to do your twenties over again, but with more wisdom and less hormones. And Gabby is here because I said yes to the phone call.

Dirty, dangerous, fun, exciting, interesting, challenging, rewarding: working overseas is all of those.

It pegs my meter.

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