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At Home Abroad / Third Culture Kids : Nowhere to call home but I like being a global nomad

By Anne-Sophie Bolon International Herald Tribune

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'Let me get this straight,' said the immigration official at Raleigh-Durham airport in North Carolina, reviewing the documents that would allow me onto U.S. soil for the first time. 'You have a French passport, which was issued in Indonesia, you were born in Australia, and your J-11 visa for entry into the United States of America was delivered in Venezuela. Is that right?'

Indeed, it was. What made the official even more wary was the fact that I sounded distinctly American, without a trace of a foreign accent. 'Your English is amazing, how much time have you spent in the United States?' he asked. 'Approximately 18 minutes,' I said. 'This is my first time.'

He was incredulous when I explained that I had acquired an American accent while studying in international schools overseas, but eventually issued me a verbal 'Welcome to America.' It was to be my fifth country of residence in 17 years, only two years of which were spent in France, my 'passport country.'

According to a fairly new area of study, I am a 'Third Culture Kid' — a TCK — or an Adult Third Culture Kid, to be exact. Some prefer the expression 'Global Nomad,' but both terms refer to an increasingly large group of individuals who have spent a significant portion of their formative years overseas. To many sons and daughters of business executives, diplomats, military officials and missionaries, a passport is little more than a travel document, for it does not necessarily denote where 'home' is.

Between 'Third Culture Kids' there is an inexplicable link that is difficult to describe. Often I have been introduced to someone with whom I immediately bonded, only to learn later that the person had also grown up overseas. We relate to our shared 'Third Culture' better than to our parents' culture (the first) or that of our host country (the second). What is surprising is that someone who grew up in a mission in Africa shares the same 'third culture' as a diplomat's child who grew up in Guatemala.

For us, home sometimes changed every few years, with a shift in language and culture often accompanying the inevitable changes in schools and houses. The question most often posed when people learn about my childhood overseas is, 'Wasn't it difficult to move around like that repeatedly, not to feel as though you had a real home?'

As a child, however, the idea never even occurred to me. When one is born eight time zones away from one's passport country, how can being overseas possibly appear difficult? For young global nomads, tackling cultural and linguistic hurdles is the norm. The question is comparable to asking a native of Seoul if it was difficult to learn to speak Korean.

As children, my siblings and I were oblivious to our good fortune. We laughed at the English accents of UTA's airline staff during our yearly 22-hour journeys between Australia and France. We didn't realize how lucky we were to be raised in a bilingual environment.

My earliest memory of genuine change is of the day my parents called the five of us into a room to announce that we would soon be leaving Australia. With atlas in hand, our father — a civil engineer — pointed to Indonesia and we learned that we would soon embark upon a new life there.

It was in Jakarta that we learned to boil water before drinking it, and that, at the age of 7, I knew not to handle objects with my left hand for fear of offending Indonesians. It was also there that I first questioned the foundations of racism, when passers-by pointed and yelled *orang putih* (white person).

Indonesia exposed us to true poverty and to danger. We awoke one night in 1984 to discover damage to our home, only to learn that a nearby ammunition dump had caught fire and that bombs were raining on our neighborhood.

Our education in politics and social upheaval continued several years later in Venezuela. We

witnessed several coup attempts — one of which sent bullets through my father's office window — with riots, pillaged stores and empty supermarket shelves. Martial law and curfew ensued, while tanks and armed boys — they did not look older than 16 — patrolled our neighborhood in Caracas.

More than anything, living overseas provided us with many rich, wonderful memories. While my Bahasa Indonesia is no longer fluent, I still enjoy spicy Indonesian food, the tartness of tamarind and the joys of chewing on sugar cane. There is a particular color that I can envision that can only be described as "rice paddy green." I still like knowing that I learned to speak Spanish by listening to salsa.

In Venezuela I tackled an application form for an American university that required an essay on the following subject: "If you were to show our admissions officers your home town, what is it that you would show them, and why?" It occurred to me that I did not even know which home town to write about. The country in which I had spent the most time was Australia, and I hadn't set foot there since the age of 7.

Instead, I wrote about the house my parents owned in the south of France, where we spent our annual summer vacations. The house contained furniture, artwork, photos and souvenirs from each country we'd lived in: Indonesian batiks and puppets hung next to Venezuelan naïf paintings. Home is this sum of all our places of residence.

On moving to the United States, I left behind the comfort of being surrounded by numerous other Third Culture Kids — and soon realized the extent to which my life experiences had been different from my American fellow students. Like the immigration officer at Raleigh-Durham airport, many people exercised caution upon hearing about my past, as if they could not categorize me. Even the Red Cross was wary, once barring me from donating blood because my years overseas classified me as "high risk." More generally, I soon learnt from the reactions of some students that it was sometimes best not to mention stories of life overseas, even though they were the only stories I knew.

Four years after entering the United States, I moved to Britain to attend graduate school. At Heathrow airport I only had to flash my French passport to pass through immigration.

No, I did not find it particularly difficult to grow up overseas. My experiences abroad were as rich and positive as they were varied, and if anything, I consider myself incredibly fortunate. But sometimes it is nice to walk through immigration like everyone else, without having a stranger scrutinize one's life story. - Anne-Sophie Bolon is on the staff of the International Herald Tribune. [Not to be reproduced without the permission of the author.]

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