

# Essential Advice for Returning Expat

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Tricia Alach has interviewed many Kiwi expats upon their return to New Zealand. While each interviewee offered a unique perspective and advice based on their own experience, there are a number of common themes. These can be grouped into perspective, place and perseverance.



## 1. Perspective

Perspective advice related to a number of facets to do with the move and centred on the idea that how you view the move will, in large part, determine how you experience it. Advice included:

**Have no expectations...except one**

Several of the interviewees advised against the setting of particular expectations in relation to coming back to NZ. This included not setting expectations about how you would feel about the return or, what you would do. There was a general sense that setting expectations was the surest way to be disappointed, so it was much better to stay open to whatever happened and learn to go with the flow.

They also counselled against having firm expectations around what NZ would be like, as many noted, NZ has changed quite significantly in the past few years. Depending on how long you have been away, it might actually feel like coming to a foreign land.

One area where it was particularly important to have no expectations was in relation to old friendships. Several interviewees reported that while you may reasonably expect that the relationship will have changed, you can't really predict which way it will go. For some this had meant, accepting that an old friendship was actually over and consciously moving on. For others, it meant that finding that someone, with whom they'd previously had not much in common, could now become a best friend.

And the one expectation you are advised to have? That the transition back into life in NZ will feel weird. There will be culture shock, especially if you have been away for a long time and not made frequent visits back. You may even have to relearn to be a New Zealander if you've fully adopted the cultural norms of your adopted homeland.

But weird isn't necessarily bad and, that feeling won't last forever. The advice here is to accept that things will be different to what you are used to so just do your best to adapt.

## Wherever you go there you are

As one interviewee put it 'If you're not happy where you are living, don't expect to be happy back in NZ'. Coming back can be hard and, transitions have their own challenges, which may make your life feel even more difficult than before. Moreover if the reasons you are unhappy are internal, or to do with the way you behave, they will certainly follow you back.

Rather than rushing your decision to come back to NZ in the hope that things will be better here, the advice is to take your time and consider your options. In hindsight, some interviewees felt they could have been happier where they were, if they'd invested some time and energy into making changes in their existing life.



## Make it a conscious choice, not a default decision

As the saying goes, you may have to leave but you don't have to go home. There was a general sense that, while NZ does offer a unique, and enviable, lifestyle you have to actually want that lifestyle in order to enjoy it.

Several interviewees advised the careful weighing of options when deciding to move on from the place you are living. It may be that you have reached the end of your

adventure, or legal right to stay, in that particular place. But, that doesn't mean you have to come back to NZ. There are many other places in the world you could go for another one year working-holiday or, apply for a more permanent job.

For those who do decide to come back to NZ, the advice was to see this as a choice for now rather than your last stop. Several of the interviewees had secured citizenship in the place they had left, just in case they wanted to go back. Others had no intention of returning to a place they had previously lived but, were very open to the possibility they would leave NZ and live abroad somewhere else at some point in the future.

The essential point is to see your decision to move to NZ at this point in time as a positive, proactive, conscious decision – one which makes sense for you in terms of your bigger life plan. Framing the move in this way can help you to view any challenges and difficulties you experience along the way through a different, 'bigger picture' perspective. This was advised as a more helpful way to view the situation, rather than framing it as a forced move over which you had no choice.

### **Ask not what your country can do for you...**

Several interviewees advised returners to think about what they can contribute to making NZ the place they'd like to be, rather than just expecting their every wish to be fulfilled. This included making a conscious plan to get involved in the community in which you choose to live and, following the advice to 'create whatever you can't find' yourself.

A number of interviewees had done this themselves, from creating an app to connect volunteers in the BOP with local opportunities to setting up meet-ups for internationally minded women in Wellington. Others had got involved politically or joined other organisations which promoted the causes in which they believed.

Following this advice helps the transition by providing the returner with a greater sense of agency in relation to creating the NZ in which they want to live. It also means you become much more a part of the solution rather than just another person moaning about problems you perceive and want someone else to fix. This can have additional social benefits when conversing with locals who might not be so keen on hearing your list of things that are wrong with NZ.



## 2. Place

One thing that is important to note is that there is no such thing as the Kiwi lifestyle – there are many. And, the lifestyle you are looking for, may be in a different place to that which you expect. Understanding what is important to you in terms of daily experience and interactions is key to finding your best fit.

### Where you first lay your hat, may not be your home

A number of interviewees advised that choosing where to live is the most important move-related choice and should be based on the lifestyle you want to lead in NZ. Ideally, the ability to make this decision should be based on recent, and fairly deep, knowledge of NZ including which city, town or village might offer the best fit.

A number of interviewees had actually been through a long process of discovery in order to make this decision for themselves, coming back to NZ for an extended period every year and visiting different parts of the country before they made their choice. In some cases this meant staying away for longer in order to save more money to bring back or, buying property while still abroad on the expectation their salary would drop when they came back to NZ.

For those who can't, or don't want to, do this before they come back, the advice is to maintain an open mind about where, in NZ, you might end up. Several advised trying out a different city to the one you left and, taking your time to find the place that really feels like home. Some had done this by house-sitting in different parts of the country when they first arrived. Others had started in one place for job reasons and then moved to another location once they were professionally established.

Your experience of the move back to NZ can also change significantly if you move town. You may hate everything about the first place you land when you get back but find that a move to a different town or city totally changes your view. This seemed to be especially so for those who had relocated from a big city to a smaller town. Affordability, connection to the community and, having a short commute being some of the benefits cited from making that move.

Your personal situation, in particular, whether you have spouses and kids that need to be considered, may determine whether you try and do this research before or after you land but, the advice remains – finding your true home in NZ might mean a bit of moving around.



## Be here now

Once you have landed and decided where you are going to set up your home, the advice is clear. In order to make it work, you have to be there – physically, mentally and emotionally! This means cutting ties with your former life or, as one interviewee put it ‘closing the door on your former life, so that a new one can open into NZ’.

It also means putting in the effort to make new friends and create the social networks you will need to sustain you in your new life. So, as tempting as it is to prioritise time online with your old friends, you will gain much more benefit from going out in person to meet new people who might become part of your new life.

## Comparison is the thief of joy

More or less the same advice applies to any other aspect of your previous life. There is nothing to be gained from constantly comparing your old job, commute or cereal options with what you find in NZ. As one of the interviewees succinctly put it ‘you just have to accept, this is your life now and do the best you can’.

## Impose a 'no decision' zone

Several of the interviewees reported imposing a ‘no decision’ zone on themselves. This was a timeframe, usually between two and three years, during which they were fully committed to being in NZ and had no discussions about the possibility of leaving again.

There are several benefits to fully committing to being here for a specific length of time. The first is that you don’t waste energy constantly second guessing your choice which gives you more energy to put into creating the life you want. This can also reduce the stress and anxiety of moving by simply taking away the need to consider other options during that time.

Secondly, by giving yourself a good few years to experience the ups and downs of transition, you are more likely to have an experience of living in NZ that reflects what your life would be like if you decide to stay, than if you’re constantly teetering on the verge of leaving again. This means that at the end of the designated time period you can more rationally and dispassionately assess the situation and decide on your next step.



### 3. Perseverance

The third set of advice had to do with perseverance. Many interviewees highlighted the first six months as being particularly tough while a number felt this difficult period extended to the first year. Within this time period it was advised to be especially open minded, in relation to how you feel, what you do and, where you might eventually live. Others have suggested that it can take a good two to four years to decide whether you like living in NZ. To be able to make that call you might have to move town, change jobs and, you definitely have to spend a lot of time trying to make new friends.

You will have to let go of your old life and, possibly some perceptions of yourself. You may even have to relearn how to be a Kiwi or actively participate in redefining what that means in much broader terms.

In many ways, your return will feel a lot like the first year or so of living abroad. A lot will be familiar, a lot will be different. Some things you'll think are better than where you've moved here from, some things you'll think are worse. You may experience lots of new things and meet a lot of new people and, you might change a lot.

But if you persevere, just like you did when you first went overseas, that which is strange will become familiar, that which is wrong may come to seem right. You will meet people you wouldn't have met, and consider opportunities that you wouldn't have had, while living abroad. You'll dig deep into your globility skills of resourcefulness and adaptability and, eventually carve out a new life.

Then it's up to you to choose whether it's the life you want. If not, NZ will still be here if you want to leave and try again at some other time.