

What Do You Expect When You Return?

By Tricia Alach and Kea 23 August 2018

Returned Kiwi expat [Tricia Alach](#) has been interviewing fellow 'repats'. While most reported leaving NZ with a sense of adventure and no real expectations about what lay ahead, the majority relayed quite specific expectations about what they expected upon returning. This included expectations on what life in NZ would be like, personal and professional outcomes they expected to achieve, and how they expected to feel about being back.

Where do our expectations come from?

Several members of the group had returned to live in NZ on one or more previous occasion and this experience played a significant part in shaping their expectations for their latest return. Others reported basing their expectations on what they experienced while visiting NZ over multiple years. Each holiday was part research trip to gather information which factored into their decision about whether, or how, to return.

A few had got advice from friends who had already moved back to NZ while a couple, who had been living away from NZ for a very long time, had mainly based their expectations on the memories they had of the NZ they had left.

What do we expect?

Broadly speaking the interviewees fell into two broad camps, those who had very high expectations for their return to NZ and, those who were basically dreading it, but came nonetheless. I'll begin with the 'negative' expectations reported by the group.

Once bitten, twice shy

Those who had returned to NZ on a previous occasion were uniform in their belief that returning to live in NZ would be hard. Several reported 'dreading coming back' and that they had 'stepped themselves' for the experience in the belief they would be miserable for some time. Much of this was to do with their previous experience of coming back during which they felt lonely, bored and disconnected from NZ life. As a result they had felt that they no longer 'fit in' to NZ life and, thus had made the decision to leave again.



People will have moved on

Several interviewees reported that they expected, intellectually at least, that the friends they had left behind would have moved on with their lives which meant they couldn't hold out too much hope for reconnecting with these people in the way they had before they left. This was by far the most common piece of advice that the interviewees had received before moving back and, the expectation most borne out by their own experience.

Settling down means settling for less

Several interviewees reported that they expected their world to get smaller when they moved back to NZ. This was often due to a belief that the relative isolation of NZ meant being less connected to the outside world as well. Those who had returned to NZ on previous occasion reported having this experience of 'disconnection' which was often the main reason they decided to leave again.

This concern was also especially high for those who had lived in large, dynamic and diverse cities overseas and enjoyed a lifestyle in which they counted people from many countries amongst their friends. Losing that sense of being part of an international community, and the diversity of thought this brings, was something a number of the interviewees were really dreading when they made the decision to come back to NZ.

Many interviewees also expected NZ to offer fewer opportunities in terms of work or travel and, that the 'fun times' they had enjoyed while they were away were over for the most part. There was a sense that they would be expected to knuckle down and grow

up, assume the responsibilities of full adulthood and settle – career, travel, entertainment wise – for what they could get.

For others this sense of settling for less was related to a drop in material circumstance. Many had enjoyed an expat lifestyle – earning high salaries while paying low tax – which meant they had a high level of disposable income, and a high standard of living, they didn't expect to match in NZ.

Others reported that while they had expected the cost of living in NZ to be higher than what they were used to abroad, they hadn't anticipated just how much. On the other hand...

An unparalleled lifestyle

The traditional NZ lifestyle – easy going & outdoorsy – was what most of the interviewees were both, expecting to find and, looking forward to when they returned. Many reported that this expectation trumped or overrode any other hesitations they might have had.

For some, the way to manage the psychological impact of their expected drop in spending power was to put a higher value on the lifestyle they could have here. This was especially so for those who had chosen to return because of their children and, those who simply valued having more outdoor space to enjoy.



Safety and security, a haven from the world

Unlike those who dreaded being culturally disconnected from the wider world, for some of the interviewees the expectation that they would be physically distant from the rest of the world was seen as a major plus.

In relative terms, NZ was seen, by the interviewees, as much safer than the countries they had left. This was both in terms of being less likely to face any external threat and, in how the society conducts itself. Parents of small kids reported feeling much more confident about allowing their children to run around outside freely, and without adult supervision, something they would never have done in the place where they had moved from.

Clean, green and socially progressive

A number of interviewees reported that they expected NZ to have remained clean, green and unpolluted – at least relative to where they had been. Additionally, there was a belief that NZ was still a country with strong community values, where the social ills of other nations did not exist. Interestingly, it was this set of expectations that were most likely to be dashed when the interviewee returned prompting several to wonder what had happened to their country, and their countrymen while they'd been abroad. More on this in upcoming blogs.

Coming *back* vs. Going *to*

One factor that shaped the expectations reported by the interviewees to some extent was whether they couched their return to NZ in terms of 'coming back' to the life they had left or, as an experience of 'going to' create a new life in NZ.

By and large, those who perceived the move as going to a new place, where they would start again and create a new life were those who had multiple experiences of doing just that. This included those 'expats' in the group who had the experience of starting new lives in multiple locations and those, who had made more than one return to NZ. What these interviewees shared was an experience where having too many expectations of how things should be, had typically led to disappointment.

For those people in the group, the key was to keep expectations of any specific outcomes in check. By and large they expected the initial period of transition to be challenging so gave themselves a year or two to go through the process without any specific outcomes in mind.

This meant they were open to the possibility of moving again, either within NZ or overseas, if their initial landing pad didn't work out. They were also open to exploring different options for how, and at what, they might like to work and, with whom, and how, they might make new friends.

But what they did expect was that they would have to proactively work at creating this new life they had come to NZ to live. That meant not taking anything for granted and, in some cases, being prepared to start, both personally and professionally, from scratch.