

COMING BACK TO NZ:

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Returned expat [Tricia Alach](#) has interviewed a number of returning Kiwis to find out what they found most surprising, challenging and joyful about their return. The experience of coming back to live in NZ is reported as a mixed bag by all interviewees.

Same, same but different

One thing it is important to note is that many interviewees reported the same things had surprised, challenged or delighted them but, in completely the opposite way. For example, depending on where the person had moved here from, NZ was seen as prohibitively expensive or relatively cheap, progressive or antiquated and easy to navigate or hard to break into.

Additionally, personal preferences and personalities affected how they experienced many of the same things. For example, one interviewee's greatest joy was when strangers spoke to her in shops, while another singled that out as the most annoying thing she had experienced on her return. In another example, many found NZ's relaxed dress code a true delight while others bemoaned the lack of glamour and proliferation of activewear on the streets.

What surprised us most was... unexpected.

A few common themes did emerge around what the interviewees as a group found surprising when they first got back. These include:



Feeling like an alien

Although most people expected to feel a bit out of place when they first got back, a few interviewees reported being surprised at how much they experienced a reverse culture shock, especially if they had found their transition into another country to be relatively smooth.

This included those who had been away for nearly 20 years and those who had been away for much less time. Realising that they had forgotten, or no longer knew, how to do basic things came as a surprise, as did feeling like they had to relearn how to be a New Zealander in order to fit back in.

Examples of having to relearn how to be a New Zealander included tempering the extroverted personality they had cultivated while away, being less direct in communication style and less open emotionally, especially about negative feelings.

Missing faraway friends and the old home

Several interviewees reported how surprised they had been at how much they still missed their old home, lifestyle and friends abroad. Some still felt this quite keenly, even after more than five years back in NZ. Others reported being surprised at how quickly the close friendships they'd had while abroad had dissipated as everyone involved moved on with their lives.

This feeling of disconnection was sometimes exacerbated if the person was struggling to make new social connections in NZ.

The cost of living is on everyone's mind

Several of the interviewees reported being surprised at the high cost of living in NZ compared to where they had moved here from. For example, the cost of eating out, travelling abroad and discovering how even well-paid friends were struggling financially because of large mortgages.

But even those who didn't think NZ was all that expensive were surprised at how often New Zealanders talked about how much things cost. One interviewee reported that the people she met discussed the cost of living in the way people in the UK talked about the weather all the time.

On a more positive note...



NZ has grown up and got more interesting

Several interviewees reported being really surprised at how much more dynamic and diverse NZ had become while they were away. This was especially true in the cities and in smaller towns which boast large immigrant communities. Those who had moved to Wellington, in particular, reported their delight at discovering they were joining work teams full of colleagues from all over the world and how much they enjoyed hearing different languages spoken as they moved about town.

In another case, one interviewee, who had moved from London to Blenheim, was happily surprised to discover how many UK immigrants were living in the town. Ironically, being surrounded by foreigners can actually help returners feel more at home and make it easier to fit in.

Relatedly there was a sense that NZ has become much more creative and innovative since they had been gone. This was also reported in the cities and in some of the smaller towns. Tauranga, in particular, was considered remarkable in its rapid transformation from sleepy retirement village to an internationally diverse and culturally dynamic town.

Discovering these developments meant a number of interviewees felt much more positive about their return than they had been expecting to feel – a sense that while they had been away exploring the world, much of the world had come to NZ.

My behaviour can change my experience

Several of the interviewees had returned to NZ to live on one or more occasion, hated it and left again. Armed with the wisdom of their previous experience and, the skills they had developed overseas, they set about managing this return to NZ in a different way.

One aspect of the return that was cited as easier to influence than originally expected by some interviewees was around meeting like-minded people and making new friends. Whereas on previous returns the interviewee may have tried to simply fit back into old networks, on this return they had been much more proactive about finding and attracting the kinds of new friends they wanted to meet. In some cases this included starting their own meet-up groups or joining existing organisations, such as Inter Nations, to meet people whose experience and interests matched their own.

Those who had done this reported being surprised at how quickly (compared to previous returns) they had 'attracted a tribe who matched their vibe' and created a new network of friends.

How easy it is to get things done

Those who had moved back from the UK, in particular, noted their surprise at how easily and how quickly they could get things done, both personally and professionally. Coming from a 'computer says no' mentality to NZ's relatively relaxed approach had been a welcome surprise. Examples ranged from the joy of dealing with a helpful bank manager to the ease of finding housesitting gigs. Additionally, the willingness of complete strangers to meet you for a coffee and help out professionally was seen as a uniquely NZ thing.

A process of experimentation, reflection and integration

So what I've learned about becoming a glocal is that the key is to figure out how to honour and incorporate those global aspects that have become a part of your core being, without getting stuck in the past. It's a continual process of experimentation and integration – trying new things, reflecting on what works and consciously choosing which aspects of my global orientation I want to bring into my local existence to create a life in NZ that I actually like.

My discussions with other repats also show that there is no one way to do this so embrace the fact that you may have different drivers, motivations and perspectives on the world to all the other people you might meet. This includes other returners because we are often just as different to each other as we are to those who have never left NZ.

Acknowledge the influences that have brought you to this point but accept your current situation for what it is. Don't place too much importance on how much of what you are experiencing is because you went away. Spend your energy figuring out what you need to be happy here in NZ, what you need to honour your unique needs and how you need to spend your time to make you feel at home.