

Coming Home

The Joys of Being Back Home

Tricia Alach has interviewed many Kiwi expats coming home to New Zealand. Despite the personal challenges each interviewee experienced transitioning back home, all experienced the same joys of being back. Here she explores the most commonly reported joys – making connections, spending time in nature, a greater sense of freedom and becoming more comfortable at being themselves.



Reconnecting with family

Being close to family ranked top of the list. Many had left NZ in their early twenties so their return was seen as an opportunity to (re) establish different, or deeper, relationships with their immediate, or extended, family.

In particular being able to spend time with young nieces and nephews was reported as a great source of joy by a number of interviewees. Several also commented on how much

they had enjoyed getting to know, as an adult, their parents and siblings for the very first time.

For some, the opportunity to take part in all family celebrations, from birthdays to weddings to cultural traditions, was a great source of joy. For others, having family members to rely on for the first time in years provided a much needed sense of security. The simple act of being able to go on holiday knowing that a family member was looking after your pets, or that you had someone you could call if your car broke down, provided many interviews with a great sense of support which they hadn't had in the self-sufficient years they had lived abroad.

Connecting with community

Feeling like you belong to your community is something a number of interviewees reported as bringing them joy. In some cases the community was geographical e.g. simply knowing more of the people you pass on the street. In other cases it was related to a shared interest or hobby e.g. seeing the same people at yoga or your painting class every week.

Several interviewees had actively sought out, or created, communities for the recently returned, or had joined those which were internationally focused. This provided a much needed sense of connection to their experience of the world. In some cases this included connecting with other Kiwis who had returned from living abroad while others spent time with foreigners working in NZ, or recent migrants, with whom they felt an experiential bond.

A number of interviewees reported that they were members of both local and virtual communities which gave them a great sense of connection to a range of different people and groups. Some had kept up strong relations with virtual communities they were a part of while abroad while others had actively sought out virtual communities based in NZ with whom they could interact.

The exact nature and form the community took didn't seem to matter that much. What was important was that the interviewee could connect with kindred spirits, those who 'got where they were coming from'. This connection provided a sense of belonging here and, helped counteract the feelings of loneliness or isolation so common in the transition back into life in NZ.



Spending time in nature

The interviewees were a true bunch of water babies with, the ease of access to the ocean cited as the greatest source of nature related joy. Several of the Wellington based interviewees reported regularly taking a stroll along the waterfront on their way to or from work, while those in other locations enjoyed being able to jump in the car and head to the beach on a whim.

Having the time to be able to enjoy being outside, and appreciate the beauty of NZ, was also reported by a number of interviewees. The strong value placed on work-life balance in NZ was seen as key to this. A number of interviewees reported that, in the summer months, they often took a beach walk before heading to the office and still had time after work to go for a hike.

For others the closeness of nature, in both city and country, was a great source of joy that made being outside more appealing and provided an endless source of delight. As one interviewee put it 'We can have everything we had in London and, we have owls on the roof at night'.

The sunny side of life

Related to being able to enjoy nature thanks to its proximity and, the relatively relaxed Kiwi pace of life, the blue skies, mild temperatures and endless sunshine (even in the winter) were reported as a major source of joy, especially for those coming from the perennially grey northern hemisphere countries such as the Netherlands and the UK.

For some, who had experienced a form of SAD (seasonal affective disorder) when living in less sunny places, the ability to take a short walk on a sunny winter's day was a great source of simple joy. One that contributed to a greater sense of overall wellbeing for many of the interviewees.



A different kind of freedom

For many coming back to NZ meant consciously giving up the freedoms that came from living a prolonged adolescence in London or, enjoying an expat lifestyle somewhere else. That freedom stemmed mainly from having few ties or responsibilities, along with having proportionately more disposable income to spend. In contrast, coming back to NZ often coincided with the assumption of more responsibility, for example, caring for an ageing parents or taking on a mortgage for the first time.

Nevertheless, interviewees reported that they felt a different kind of freedom in NZ, one in which they were better able to rest, relax and be themselves. Sometimes this was due to simple things like being able to speak without translating from NZ English into something else. In other cases it was knowing that there was a support base they could call on which freed them from having to do everything themselves.

The relative safety and security of NZ especially compared to some of the places the interviewees had moved here from, also contributed to a feeling of greater freedom in a psychological sense. Many reported feeling calmer, more settled, less anxious than they had been abroad.

This was especially so for those who had children. These interviewees reported gaining great joy from being able to let their kids run about outside in a way that simply wouldn't have been possible in the place they had previously lived.

Feeling more comfortable being me

A number of interviewees reported that one of the things that brought them the most joy was when they started to feel more comfortable in themselves. In some cases this corresponded to the day they started to feel like they belonged in NZ – shopping at local markets, running into people they knew in the street or, simply being able to easily navigate around town.

For others, it was the realisation that they were putting out a different energy because they were felt more settled and secure in themselves. This realisation often reflected a sense of self-growth which meant the person had managed to reconcile an internal conflict that might have been raging for some time.

For a couple of interviewees the sense of feeling more comfortable in themselves came when they were able to observe that their life priorities had changed and that they were totally OK with that. This was often seen as evidence that they were no longer trying to hold on to their old self, or their old life. In many cases this brought about a shift in focus, from past to present, with more energy directed towards creating the future, than clinging to the past.

Even when it was uncomfortable, some interviewees got a sort of joy out of feeling that they had been forced to grow up when they came back to NZ. For some, who had gone away at a young age and lived a relatively unencumbered life, being forced to confront who they were and what they really wanted out of life had been difficult but, ultimately led them to a place of greater clarity where they were able to make decisions about their next step in life.