

SO LONG SUMMER...

ANDREW RUDGE

Andrew lives in Holland with his wife Nicky and has been a DESTINATIONS sub-editor for the last couple of years. He reflects here on the summer that was.

By the time this issue of Destinations hits desks and post boxes summer here in the northern hemisphere will be drawing to a close. Mother Nature, her summer finery growing dusty, faded and worn, will be sorting through her wardrobe in search of the russets, golds and browns more suited to the fields of autumn. For the moment, the forests and fields will smell of summer; there'll still be plenty of time and long enough days for lazing on the beach; the central heating won't yet have kicked-in, and the grass will still need the attentions of the mower on Sunday morning. But you can feel autumn waiting around the corner.

In countries in and around the tropics you're still in shorts; still wilting under a blazing sun as you make your way from one air-conditioned haven to the next; still looking forward to more days on the beach or around the pool, while secretly longing for a time when the temperature and humidity return to levels more suited to human physiology. Somewhere or other there has to be a perfect climate, a sort of Goldilocks combination that's just right, but maybe without the complication of the bears.

But here, early September is the fag end of summer and the blue tits that flew a nest in the narrow neck of an earthenware vase on our terrace will be indistinguishable from the others that vie with their larger cousins, the great tits, for a place on the peanut feeders. Their parents

may have gone on to hatch another brood in someone else's garden, putting still more miles on their clocks as they flit to and fro, beaks full with late summer grubs and insects. The parakeets that screech and swirl around the garden will probably have disappeared for a few weeks, as they do each September, to feast on some sweet crop away from the woods and gardens of Den Haag. But the jackdaws will still be here, striding purposefully across the lawn, elbowing the woodpeckers and pigeons away from the prime feeding spots. Meanwhile, in Scotland, Canada, Alaska and every point towards the Arctic Circle, clouds of flies, midges and no-see-ums will be tormenting every living thing out in the afternoon and evening sun. Fishermen will be forced to hide behind hats draped in mosquito netting as they tempt the salmon and trout with flies of their own, and swallows will swoop and soar through a larder of plenty.

Schools will be full once again and thousands of classrooms around the world will echo to the groans of children forced to commit their summer adventures to paper in the ritual of the 'what I did this summer' essay. Tennis rackets and cricket bats will be enjoying a few last outings before consignment to the cupboard under the stairs in favour of hockey sticks and footballs. Parents who spent the summer ferrying kids from park to airport to beach to party - brushing sand from picnic food, washing a never-ending pile of

shorts, tee-shirts and tops, trying to keep track of the social diaries of their offspring – will be shifting their sights to homework, field trips and sports teams. The last of the summer visitors will be heading home and their expat hosts and hostesses, who've smiled their way through another summer as unpaid hoteliers, will be breathing a sigh of relief and reaching for the gin bottle.

The Olympics and the achievements of Michael Phelps will be old news, and any drugs scandals will run on for a few more weeks, as will speculation about whether air pollution impaired the performance of the plucky athletes from some country or other. Maybe the Ryder Cup will dominate when it gets underway later this month, but it will have to fight with Premier League football for top spot in the UK. 'Gigi' will be entering the last week of its run at the open air theatre in London's Regent's Park – 'Gigi, am I a fool without a mind' or should I have brought an umbrella? And in Verona the spectacular opera festival will be over for another year, although tourists will still be queuing to see Juliet's balcony. The orchestra will be rehearsing 'Rule Britannia' for the Last Night of The Proms at the Albert Hall in London, and if you're an expat in Den Haag you can still look forward to the International Community Fair later in the month. You're too late to make use of the free beach libraries at Scheveningen and Kijkduin, however, and you've just missed the festival of music and dance at the Binnenhof, but there's always next year and maybe they'll keep the polystyrene iceberg in the Hofvijver and the inverted silver tree in Lange Voorhout.

We're hoping that down there in the French Pyrenees the carpenters are almost ready to put the slates on the roof of the house we're building, despite the month-long vacation that is August in France. It'll be good to get the place weatherproof so we can concentrate on getting the interior walls built and the floor finished. And it'll spell an end to the rain delays that have plagued us since the foundations went in last March. With any luck we could all be looking forward to an Indian Summer to make up for the wet and dreary affair we've had so far this year.

Maybe it's been better out there in the rest of expat land, but here in Den Haag we've had more than our fair share of the wet stuff



and throughout Europe there have been more mutterings about our old and controversial friend climate change. Strange, really, as I seem to recall a slot in a BBC TV programme in which some pundit or other was recommending the type of Mediterranean plants UK gardeners would need for the new, hotter and drier conditions brought on by global warming! It's an odd and capricious world. Tot ziens!

Antoon, Kick and Sasha go for a walk in the jungle.



When Antoon Roovers and his wife, Sylvia Beijnik, and two young children moved to Bintulu in 2006, they did not quite know what to expect.

THE JUNGLES OF BORNEO

MARK DEVAN

Coming from Nagoya in Japan they had to leave behind the conveniences of city life and adapt to life in a small town, but also, hearing about the mystical island of Borneo and its pristine rainforest, it seemed they were heading for an adventure.

Bintulu is an oil and gas town of about 180,000 people in the Malaysian state of Sarawak. Sarawak lies on Borneo, the third largest island in the world. The equatorial temperature stays within 23°C to 32°C so its summer all year round and perfect for shorts and t-shirts, with an occasional heavy monsoon shower.

The town is home to Shell MDS Malaysia, the world's first commercial Gas-To-Liquids (GTL) plant where Antoon works as Senior Technologist. The plant started up in 1993 and can convert about three million cubic meters of natural gas per day into nearly 15,000 barrels of very clean GTL products. These high quality waxes, specialty chemicals and transport fuels are marketed to over 40 countries worldwide.

Shell MDS Malaysia, has a small and close-knit expat community. All the conveniences expected from a small town are available. The local supermarkets are relatively well stocked with the basic necessities, and while you can't find gourmet sausages, ham or a variety of cheeses, there's plenty of fresh seafood available from the friendly neighbourhood fishermen at bargain prices.

If your idea of paradise is cruising the malls looking for the latest fashion trends, partying at the trendiest nightclubs or hanging out at overpriced gourmet coffee shops sipping latte, then you won't find it here. You can however head down to Miri; two and a half hours' drive away, or fly just over an hour to other bigger towns like Kuching or Kota Kinabalu.

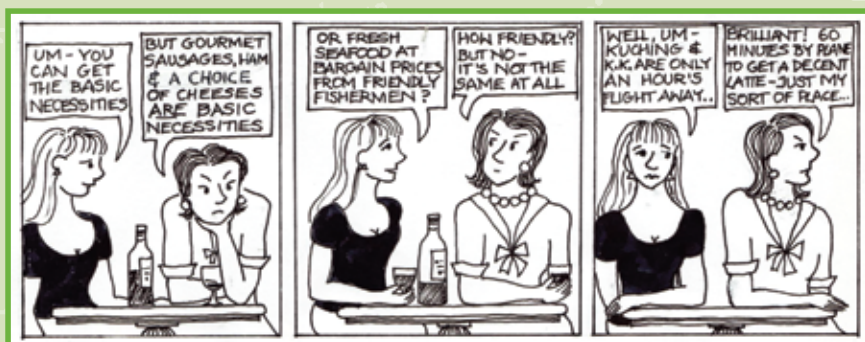
Sarawak is also an eco-tourist's paradise and with the lush flora and fauna on the doorstep, exploring is a must. It wasn't long after arriving in Bintulu that the family began to travel around

Borneo and beyond. A two-hour flight reaches Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia and the hub for low cost airlines that conveniently connect to various destinations in South East Asia. The Roovers have already been to Bali and Vietnam and other points east.

The vast open expanse of Sarawak is complemented by the rich diversity of its peoples, cultures and food - indeed each day can be a real gastronomic adventure. The specially prepared fresh fish, prawns and lobsters, seasoned with local spices and barbecued to perfection are simply to die for!

The Roovers' two children, Kick 8 and Sasha 3, now attend the Kidurong International School (KIS) located about 15 minutes away from SMDS. The school was set up 25 years ago and has seen hundreds of children from all over the world successfully advancing their education in wonderful surroundings. The South China Sea laps the shore adjacent to the school field, sea eagles and kingfishers fly overhead whilst there is an abundance of butterflies and horned beetles to be found in the school grounds.

In the beginning adjusting to this new environment was not easy for the Roovers. Moving halfway around the world to the island of Borneo, some things have to be left behind, but the new wonders opening up are what make it a memorable experience for this expat family.



Robbie's screams echo round the school gym as his mum picks him up and carries him out the door, his three-year old legs kicking wildly as he goes. He has just pushed an angelic looking two year old right off the trampoline. Kate, his mum, has warned him repeatedly that they'll have to leave if he pushes other children. She cringes at the sympathetic looks of the other mums and the comment from one, "You don't have to take him out, it's ok." Yes, thinks Kate, but if I don't do what I say, he'll be impossible for the rest of the day. As they leave the gym-tots group behind them and Robbie's wailing continues at full volume, Kate wonders how in the world she might start to make friends with these other women when she has this turbo-charged terror on her hands seven days a week.

Kate is not alone. The early weeks of a new overseas posting are often a tough time for pre-schoolers and their parents.

The family arrives in completely unfamiliar surroundings, often exhausted from the packing up and travel. They have to cope with changes

in living conditions, social networks, eating habits, schools, work routine, leisure activities and sometimes a new language to boot. When psychiatrists Holmes and Rahe developed their scale for measuring stressful life events, they didn't include international family moves, but with so many changes at one time, such moves would certainly come very high on the stress scale. Getting settled into the routine of school or work can help to limit the impact of culture shock for older family members. Babies and infants may not sleep or eat well for a while, but if they have their familiar adult and their special toy or blanket, the situation is usually manageable. For the pre-schooler however, it can be a whole lot more challenging, as can their behaviour during the first few months.

A multitude of factors make such a big move especially hard for pre-schoolers. At around three years old, children are just beginning to branch out into the big wide world beyond the immediate family. They may have just gained their confidence about separations from parents for playschool and even play dates with friends. Familiar routine is what gives their lives structure and predictability. It is hard for them to anticipate changes, as their understanding of time is not as well developed as that of older children. Also, they are less able to articulate how they feel and it is through their behaviour that they let us know if they are feeling stressed or anxious.

It is little wonder that the early months of a new posting are a difficult time. The stress is exacerbated if the family are staying in temporary accommodation for a long time and are waiting for familiar toys and other important items to arrive in sea freight. This can make it even more difficult for the child to understand that this is their permanent new home and not some kind of extended holiday. More than two months after

“CAN WE GO
HOME NOW
MUMMY?”

HELEN DAVISON

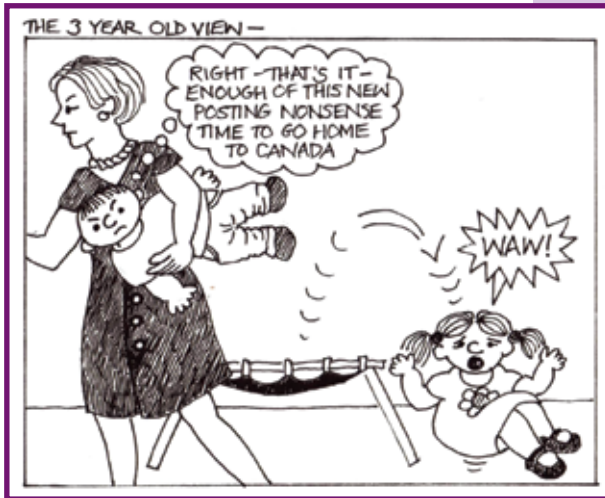


Davison family at home in Miri.

our arrival in Malaysia, my three year old son was still asking when we would be going back to our former home in Canada.

When a pre-schooler is stressed and unsettled, the whole family will feel it. It is common for them to regress in some of the developmental milestones they have recently achieved, such as being toilet-trained day or night, eating and sleeping independently and separating without tears. Their need for reassurance may manifest itself in constantly seeking parents' attention, clinginess, or aggressive and testing behaviour. Just as the parent is feeling bereft of their routine and social support, they find they have a defiant and angry child to contend with, and possibly only a handful of toys with which to divert and entertain.

The good news is that most children are remarkably resilient and resourceful. On one of my loneliest days, I thought how convenient it was that my son could simply bring his imaginary friends along with us wherever we went! There is also an upside to the way young children focus on the here and now. While it may seem the end of the world to them that the cereal doesn't taste the same as the one they are used to, within ten minutes they will have moved on to something else, while as an adult, culture shock can leave you feeling down in the dumps all day. Difficult behaviour and emotions are quite normal and not surprising when you consider what major changes everyone is dealing with in a short period of time. If you expect some tears to be shed, by both parents and children, and hang in there,



Helen Davison is a chartered clinical psychologist and worked for eight years at the Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital. She then moved with her family to Calgary and later to Miri. During both moves at least one of her three children was at the pre-school stage.

your happy, well-adjusted child will usually return within three to four months.

Here are some suggestions to ease the early months of transition: -

- Preparation before the move is still very worthwhile even it does become forgotten or confused. Make time to talk about how things might be in the new country, show pictures and make a storybook about your family moving which you can read again and again together.
- Include items in your air freight that will help your child feel settled when you arrive such as toys, books, ride on toys and familiar bedding, cups and bowls etc.
- Try to establish a routine as quickly as possible. Diet, exercise and rest are all important.
- Prioritise finding a new pre-school place before you move. The local Outpost office will provide you with information.
- Try not to make allowances when your child shows testing or defiant behaviour. He or she

is doing it partly to test if the usual limits that help them feel secure are still in place. So Kate was right to stick to her guns!

- Make time to talk to your child and acknowledge what they are feeling.
- As soon as you get a chance, talk to other ex-pat parents. They will likely be happy to offer you local knowledge, suggestions for activities, toys or books to borrow, and plenty of empathy. They may well have been in your shoes only a matter of months ago.
- If after six months your child is still showing unsettled and stressed behaviour, it may be time to consider whether factors other than the move are contributing to this.

Helen Davison is a chartered clinical psychologist and worked for eight years at the Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital. She then moved with her family to Calgary and later to Miri. During both moves at least one of her three children was at the pre-school stage.