

# An English trainer abroad

New York, Bali, Durban, Moscow, Krakow, Buenos Aries, Helsinki, Manchester. On the face of it, the trainer's life can appear to be a glamorous one. Exciting destinations, fascinating cultures, unique experiences. But is it? **Mike Barrett** and **Mark Simmonds** review the evidence

**S**aturday morning  
Stress level's high. The taxi picking you up is late. M25 is heaving. Positive you have forgotten something important. Check-in is slow, security even slower. Temporary relief as you spend half an hour in the Virgin Atlantic business lounge – cinema, cocktail bar, spa pool and hair salon. Bit like a private member's club, although you still wish you were at home, playing with the kids or messing up some DIY project.

Relief continues in business class on a 12-hour flight to Shanghai, sipping champagne, munching through a five-course dinner, watching movies, reading, thinking, sleeping, albeit alone. Heartbeat quickens as you reach your destination. Will you get 'evil eyes' or welcome smile at passport control? Did you need a visa? Which kind? Too late now. Will your baggage arrive safely? Most important of all, will a friendly face be waiting for you in arrivals to take you to the training venue or will you find yourself at the mercy of the local opportunist who smells fear in an isolated English

trainer as he frantically searches for a sign with his name or that of the hotel? What was the hotel called again?

Once safely in the taxi, fear and fatigue are replaced by anticipation as you head towards an international hotel in the middle of China's commercial centre...

## Being there

**0700hrs** You haven't slept a wink. The seven-hour time difference has played havoc with mind and body. You were disturbed by a group of latecomers whispering long and loud goodnight conversations outside your bedroom door at 3am.





Mesmerising music has been playing outside your hotel since 6am as 50 agile old age pensioners keep young by practising yoga. Breakfast, unsurprisingly, is a foreign affair. Rice and noodles. Nasi Goreng. Kim Chi. Curries galore. No sign of Shreddies anywhere (only discover the 'western style buffet' on day three).

**0900hrs** Twenty five expectant faces in front of you. A mix of nationalities. Unpronounceable names. Waiting to be educated... entertained... inspired. You are tired, hungry and apprehensive... deep breath... here we go...

**1800hrs** The first training day is done, you are exhausted, but have just enough energy (beer in hand) to reflect on the day that has been.

The Indonesians were always smiling, very tactile, men and women holding hands in a natural way. They enjoyed the teamworking activities and relished the multi-sensorial approach. Loved drawing, role playing, acting, doing.

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The Japanese displayed less obvious expression in their faces. Less prepared to contribute with confidence in plenary, for fear of looking foolish. More at home discussing points in pairs or in table groups and coming to considered points of view. Very keen to understand why they were doing what they were doing. Super-focused. Always on time.

You learned not to expect too many questions from the Koreans as questions would imply (rudely) that you hadn't explained yourself properly in the first place.

The Indians had the amazing knack of all talking very quickly, simultaneously, while still maintaining the ability to listen, absorb and process all that was

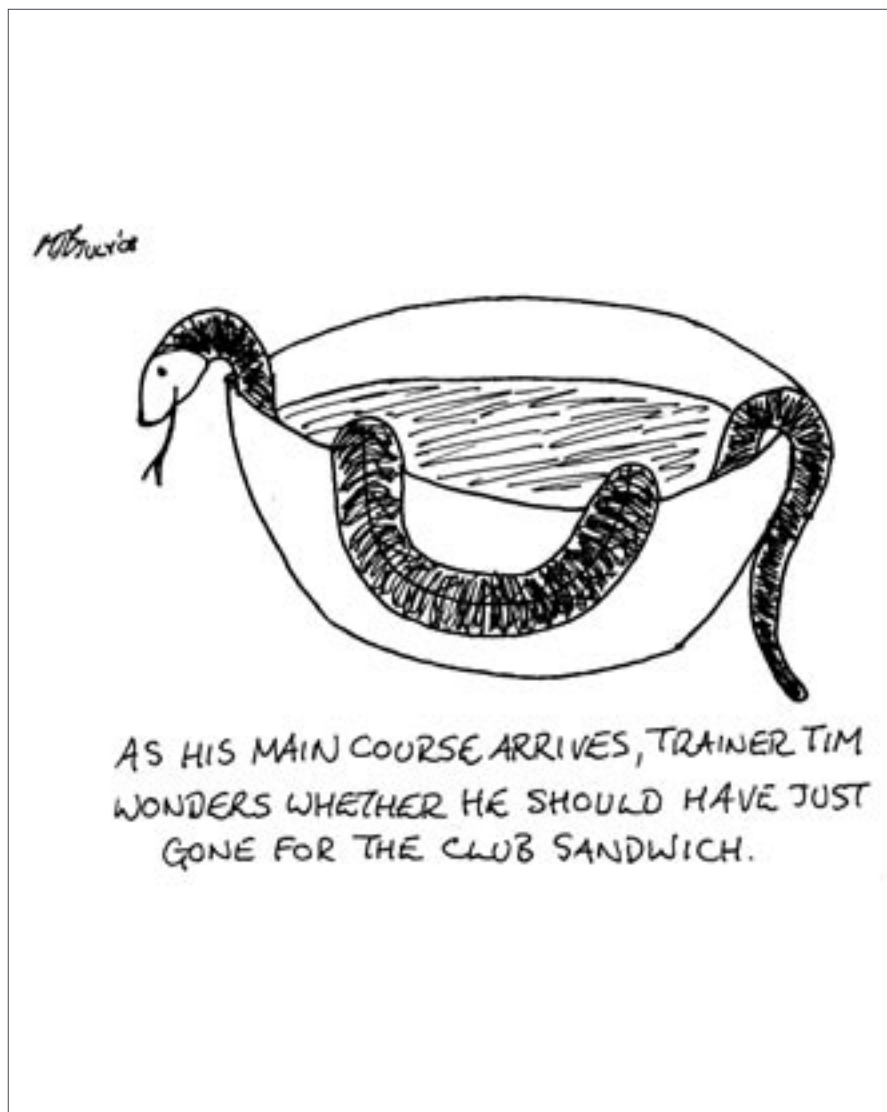
being said around them. Always debating, arguing, challenging. Very tiring but very stimulating.

The Vietnamese were more reserved, but very willing to learn. Almost conscious that their nation had just come to the corporate table and they were having their first tentative bites and sips of the business world. Biding their time, taking everything in...

The expatriated Dutch were direct and to the point. No point waffling. No point sitting on the fence. If you think that their response to your question is wrong, tell them so. Suspicious of any feedback that contains the phrase "interesting point of view" or the excuse "perhaps I did not explain the exercise brief clearly enough".

**First evening** Spend it with the participants. Formal course dinner with visiting senior managers. Make sure you have answers to the three perennial questions: Which part of England do you come from? Why did you get into training? Do you notice any differences between countries and cultures. Avoid lazy answer syndrome: a) Near London; b) I was rubbish at my real job; c) No. Evening continues with group visit to karaoke club, where you find yourself singing Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" with an Americanised Filipino, wondering a) how on earth you ever managed to hit the high notes, b) why there was no standing ovation at the end of the performance and c) why you hadn't claimed jetlag and gone to bed hours ago.

**Second evening** Decide to stay in. Thoroughly enjoy a club sandwich and French fries in the hotel's continental restaurant, finishing off with a Knickerbocker Glory. Retire to your room, read a book and go to bed early. Look sheepish and feel guilty throughout, worrying that the participants will hate you in the morning because you decided against a second night of karaoke. You are wrong. They are relieved to



not have to find any more topics of conversation, in English, with a 45-year-old past his prime.

**Third evening** Venture out on your own to the streets of Shanghai, and find a real Chinese restaurant. No one speaks English. Nothing is written in English. No pictures. Just you and three slightly bemused looking Chinese waiters... Eventually, you point, with false confidence, at an item on the menu and spend the next hour and half picking your way through Canton-style snake hotpot, which you later discover to be the local speciality. But you did it! Big pat on the back! You have been localised!

### Going home

**Final day 2100hrs** Sitting in business class, celebrating with a glass of champagne. You have a nervous peak at the evaluation forms. They all liked you... the course too. The Japanese practically wrote a thesis on their learnings; pretty illustrations and smiley face symbols from the Indonesians; the Dutch felt that you could have been even more critical, even more to the point.

**Next day 0900hrs** You crawl in through the front door, having flown half-way across the world. You half hope for a hero's welcome, end up getting

three super-active kids, English weather and a long to-do list for the weekend.

**Seven top tips for training abroad**

- 1 **Get synchronised** As soon as you board the plane, set your watch to the destination time and then do your very best to 'live' to that time zone. This increases the odds (slightly) of getting a decent night's sleep when you are away.
- 2 **Be yourself** If you are a 'considerate' trainer, be so. If you are a 'funny' trainer, be so. If you are a 'challenging' trainer, be so. Trying to be something that you are not will become quickly transparent, whichever country you are training in. Funnily enough, they do 'considerate' and 'funny' and 'challenging' in Thailand as well as in Slough!!
- 3 **Get local** Not so hard to learn how to say 'hello', 'thank you' and 'goodbye' in Polish. Not impossible to learn people's names in Saudi Arabia by the end of the three days. Mispronunciation is absolutely forgivable. And not beyond the call of duty to know that, when

**Not always glamorous, certainly very challenging and stimulating and, on balance... a whole lot better than having a proper job!!!**

- you put a business card from a Japanese participant in your back pocket and sit down, you are in fact sitting on their face!! Give and receive the business card in both hands, take a slight bow and study it carefully.
- 4 **Be good** Rigorously go through the range of learning styles and preferences, just to make sure that you are meeting the needs of all participants. Activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists are a fairly universal classification of how people learn in every corner of the world.
- 5 **Speak slowly!** The most consistent piece of positive feedback received at the end of courses run abroad is usually

around clarity of language. Although your objective may well be to introduce some fancy dan piece of management theory, the objective of a Korean participant might simply be to understand what on earth you are saying. 'Swanning around', 'done and dusted' and 'going to town on something' are likely to confuse rather than clarify.

- 6 **Be human** Imagine spending three days in a foreign country, communicating with strangers in a language that is not your first about a subject area that is probably new to you! Insert lots of time-outs throughout the day, don't skimp on lunch breaks, don't work them all night and give participants the chance to converse in their own languages. English rules do not always apply abroad. Although timekeeping is strict in Japan, the approach is more relaxed in Latin America and, if you are in Spain, don't try to rush lunch!!
- 7 **Be sensible** As well as looking after the participants, look after yourself. Get some exercise, even just a walk around the block. Get some air that has not been 'conditioned'. Get some calories into your system to maintain your energy levels as well as those of 25 hyperactive trainees!

**Seven 'must packs' for the suitcase**

What	Why
<b>A book that makes you smile</b>	Keep your spirits high in moments of gloom. Tolstoy's War and Peace? Potentially suicidal after a long and difficult first day, thousands of miles from home
<b>A local travel guide</b>	Basic phrases to help you get along and get accepted. Will also act as evidence on your retirement home bookshelf that you 'did' China in your youth
<b>Melatonin and sleeping tablets</b>	Helps combat jetlag. Might need a combination of the two (plus a couple of glasses of red wine)... in pretty quick succession... every night
<b>Ear plugs</b>	When dealing with either jetlag or exhaustion, the last thing you need is to be woken up by passing hotel guests just as you've managed to drop off
<b>Six tennis balls</b>	A number of globally recognisable energisers to be squeezed out of six easily packable balls
<b>English 'things' (tea bag, postcard of Buckingham Palace, pebble from Brighton beach, Manchester United football scarf)</b>	A little home comfort plus a different, more interesting way of answering the question "Which part of England are you from?"
<b>Local currency</b>	A small amount of local currency or US dollars can often help smooth your passage in most countries

**Final thoughts....**

On the face of it, the trainer's life can appear to be a glamorous one. Exciting destinations, fascinating cultures, unique experiences...

But is it? What's the verdict? Not always glamorous, certainly very challenging and stimulating and, on balance, a whole lot better than having a proper job!!! ■

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