

Copyright FT 2010

On FT.com and in the printed paper

Interview: ‘Being an expat is getting easier’

By Dina Medland

Published: November 24 2010 15:38 | Last updated: November 24 2010 15:38

Andrew Bainbridge says being an expatriate worker in the Middle East is, in many ways, much easier than it used to be.

He has lived in South Africa and the Middle East over the past five years, working in the financial services industry. The title of his current post barely fits on a business card: senior regional credit officer for the western hemisphere in wholesale banking at Standard Chartered Bank in the United Arab Emirates.

He took on the role in September, and for three years before that was chief executive of BMI Bank BSC (formerly BankMuscat International), a Bahrain-based bank. He has also lived in South Africa, where he worked for Barclays Bank. He is a UK citizen and is married with two daughters.

Life has grown easier partly through technology and telecoms: advances such as Skype (except in a few countries where it operates under restrictions), LinkedIn, and Facebook allow instant access to friends family and contacts.

But the distance from home still matters: “My father died a few weeks ago. I got the call in the morning and he died that afternoon and I didn’t make it. I would have had the chance to be there if I had been in the UK,” says Mr Bainbridge.

Following his recent job move within the Middle East, Mr Bainbridge and his wife initially decided to keep Bahrain as their home base, with him commuting to Dubai each week, a journey of about two and a half hours.

“The schools in Bahrain are very good and we had already established a base there. Moving can be very tough on the wives – in three of our last four moves my wife has had to do it alone because I have been travelling. One time I had to phone her from Singapore and had to ask for our address – which caused some hilarity.”

Schooling is likely to become increasingly important as his daughters get older. The younger, aged two, was born in Bahrain. “It will become much more difficult to move every few years,” he says. The Bainbridge family recently moved to Dubai, having secured the school place they wanted for their older daughter.

Mr Bainbridge adds that Dubai is often “much maligned for bling” but, while expensive, also boasts “fantastic infrastructure and is a phenomenally successful business hub”. Of his

daughter's new school, he says: "She is getting an excellent education with kids from all over the world."

Making sure the family is happy is often cited by headhunters as a prerequisite for a successful expatriate appointment. In much of the Middle East (except for Saudi Arabia) the weekend falls on Friday and Saturday, so for those dealing with Europe and America, time off can be disturbed. "That is when the family goes to the beach with friends, and iPhones and BlackBerrys come in handy," says Mr Bainbridge.

Expectation plays a big part in how one fares as an expatriate, he suggests. "You have to get used to the fact that life is transient. A lot of people in the Middle East are on two to three year contracts. You end up making new friends every few years and there is a risk of a sort of continual sense of detachment," he says.

He and his family have tended to avoid living in the residential compounds favoured by many expatriates in a bid to be "a part of the culture" as much as is possible.

"A level of emotional resilience is absolutely necessary to be an expat, as you lose your entire support network every time you move. You also need to be open to seeing and being part of a new culture. It is neither easier nor harder than being in your own country, but it is very different," he says.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2011.