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The expatriate life: Making money but feeling like a visitor

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In conversations with British expatriates in the Middle East one piece of advice recurs: read *Don't they know it's Friday?* by former British soldier and diplomat Jeremy Williams.

The title refers to the cries of the author's wife as he received phone calls throughout "non-working" Fridays when he was British Defence Attache to the UAE and Bahrain.

Expatriates (and their wives, for it is usually that way round) get used to calls on Fridays, although the weekend in most of the Gulf falls on Friday and Saturday – except in Saudi Arabia, where it is Thursday and Friday. It can get complicated for those who choose to work in Saudi Arabia but keep a family base in Bahrain.

On the other hand, expats are likely to be on call regardless of the weekend.

Most expatriates in the Gulf say they work extremely long and hard. But the financial benefits can be considerable, with mostly tax-free income and generous allowances for schooling, housing, transport, medical insurance and travel to and from home. (The latter is generally once a year but, depending on company and rank, can be as much as four times a year.)

Michela Celi, an Italian national who works in the telecoms industry in Dubai, says it is now "a well-established city that can clearly compete with New York and London as an international hub with excellent career opportunities and lifestyle".

For her, the incomes on offer are two or three times those back home in Italy.

The downside, she says, is a feeling of having "visitor status", a lack of predictability in local laws, and a "caste system" that has lower social classes performing menial tasks and not being treated well.

Across the Gulf States, being a UK national makes it easy to travel and obtain a visa on entry, although Saudi Arabia can be time-consuming to enter. But with the right pass, those living in family-friendly Bahrain and driving into Saudi Arabia for work, or to visit the many Ikea stores and wider shopping choices, face a drive of just 45 minutes – although driving in the Middle East can be scary.

Expats should expect delays in dealing with bureaucracy – for permits, driving licences etc. And they should note regional differences: cosmopolitan Jeddah, for example, is a far cry from conservative Riyadh.

Many expatriates in Saudi Arabia live in gated residential compounds, but these offer a restricted way of life, according to those who have tried them. They are also expensive.

Food is heavily led by grilled meats and kebabs with salad, but there are plentiful fast food outlets.

The climate is near perfect for those who like heat, but it can also be very humid in Dubai and Bahrain. Summers are very hot and many expat families head somewhere cooler, leaving husbands behind.

Relocation agencies have sprung up across the region to help with moves, but they can be expensive. Given the importance of networks in the Gulf, it is sensible for would-be expats to start by establishing relationships when thinking of moving.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Russia are the most popular countries for those who cite financial gain and career progression as their key reasons for becoming an expat, according to a recent [report on expat experiences](#) by HSBC Bank International. Yet those countries rank in the bottom five of 25 selected nations in the quality of life league table.

Tim Rockell, director of sales and markets for KPMG, has advice for anyone thinking of becoming an expat in the Middle East: “Don’t come here expecting things to work as they do at home, whether it is fixing a tap or doing business. Walk slowly. If you try to walk fast you will end up crashing into people and not getting on. There is a lot to get used to – and make sure your family is happy – you will travel but they will be there all the time.”

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