



A STRESS-FREE EXPAT HOLIDAY

The holiday season is meant to be a joyful time of year. Unfortunately, it can be extremely stressful for many people. So what can we do to help ourselves to have a more relaxing and recuperating holiday? Read on and find out ...

By Gabrielle Turner

With many of us in Qatar being lucky enough to live a comfortable expat life where there is no need to do our own laundry, pack our own shopping bags, or fill our own petrol tanks, life in our adopted home of Qatar may feel like a holiday (or vacation to those of us who are American). The real work can start on our trip back to our

'home', our country of origin when we have no live in babysitter and which can become a whirlwind of visits to friends and relatives.

While some of us do choose to have shorter holidays in a new destination for most of us the longer school holidays are seen either as an opportunity or an obligation

to return to our home country to visit family and friends. These trips usually comprise of the mother and children being away for up to two months. Often staying in family and friends' homes for a large proportion of holiday and only being joined by the father for 2-3 weeks of that time. Many of us may return to Doha after the summer in need of a well-earned rest.



Tasha Redfearn says:

"I avoid those manic holidays and prefer to go somewhere completely different. I persuade the rest of the family to come to visit us instead."



Tony Distin says

"I find the planning of the long summer holiday and trying to co-ordinate seeing so many different people more stressful than being at work. I often tend to take the 'ostrich' approach of sticking my head in the sand and hoping my wife will come up trumps."

So what can we do to help ourselves to have a more relaxing and recuperating holiday?

Planning

- Remind yourself that this time is for you and you are able to make decisions about how you would like to spend your time. Simplify as much as possible.
- Remember your own needs and plan realistic goals for this holiday. Make any changes to this plan and goals that are the most useful to you.
- If there are chores that you need to do while away schedule those into your plan with a limited but flexible (for those unforeseen extras) amount of time allocated to them. Ask others including your children to help with chores.
- Arrange to see those people who are most important and significant to you. Don't over schedule yourself. Research has shown that socialising is good for us, but also that it's spending time with those that we feel close to rather than 'flitting around' that makes us feel good.
- Remember that you have chosen that your children are benefitting from being raised as 'global nomads' or 'third culture kids'. Their home is where you, their parents are. Don't worry or push yourself to make sure that they see every one of your relatives and old friends, you will appreciate that time with old friends more than they do. While this might be 'home leave' for us

adults it might not feel the same way for our children.

- Double check with your partner and children what they want and need from a holiday. If they are small children simple pleasures like playing on a beach and picnicking in a park with visits from family may be best. If your children are older, they may have strong views of who they want to see and where to go. They also might need to have time allocated for studying.

Packing and preparing

Rushing around at the last moment, trying to find a passport or favourite swimming costume (or remembering to get your exit permit) is not the way to start a relaxing holiday and is quite likely to make us short tempered and grumpy with those around us.

If you have been an expat for many years packing and unpacking can become second nature, but if you are new to this, then there is quite an art to packing everything that may be needed for two months. This is especially true if like myself you travel to the UK where it's well known that it's quite possible to experience all four seasons in one day.

- Make lists of what you need to do and prioritise.
- Leave yourself plenty of time.
- Ask more experienced expats for advice.
- See what is possible to borrow from friends or family.

The flight

Plan carefully so that you have enough to keep your kids amused, clean and fed but not so much that you cannot carry your hand luggage easily.

As expats we usually don't have a choice about our mode of transport to our home country so if you have any fears or anxieties about flying or turbulence some things to remember are:

- Even from 100m away and definitely from the ground there is no sign that your plane is experiencing any bumpiness.
- One of the most important aspects to focus on is your breathing, breathe slowly through your nostrils allowing

your exhalation to be a little longer than your inhalation.

- Practice the exercise (see the end of this article).

In the longer term to overcome these fears you could start by educating yourself about fear and flying. Look for support and help to change your fearful thought patterns and feelings.

Jet lag

- Fifty per cent of jet lag is thought to be psychological, so set off calmly and well rested with a positive attitude.
- Adjust your watch to the time of your destination. This is unless you need to take regular medication eg. for diabetes, then follow your doctor's instructions.
- Stay hydrated.
- When flying to the east it is important to expose yourself to lots of light in the daytime to adjust your body clock forward. Unwind with some decaf herbal tea and go to bed at a reasonable time.
- If flying to the west, exposure to light in the evening to adjust your body clock backwards. Try to stay awake until at least 9pm.

At last, the holiday!

- Try to get a balance of spending time with family while also getting some time just by yourselves.
- Time with good friends releases oxytocin - a hormone which not only combats stress but can also lower blood pressure.
- Spend time interacting with your children and having fun with them. Children often enjoy a simple board game with the family just as much as an exciting day out. Laughing with your children can reduce tension and the adrenaline and cortisol which are released into our bodies when we are stressed.
- Find some time for romance and relaxation with your partner.
- Be mindful about enjoying the moment.
- Find some time for some good light hearted holiday reads.
- Enjoy a different type of natural environment than we have in Doha - enjoy the greenery and the trees!
- If possible, have some time during the

holiday when you have booked some accommodation, maybe a cottage in the countryside. This can give you all a chance to stay still for a while and to unpack those suitcases! A place where you can all be yourselves and also be the hosts rather than the visitors.

- Leave the office (your laptop and phone) at work! Easier said than done for many high performing expats but if it can't be left at home set aside a part of the day and for the rest enjoy the holiday with the family.

Staying fit and healthy on holiday

- Using a gym or being in your normal fitness regime isn't always necessary to keep fit while you are away. There can be many new opportunities to keep healthily active. How about going for a hike or renting a bicycle? Walking in nature has also been shown to significantly boost mood and self-esteem. If you are feeling stressed, then doing some more active exercise is a good way to start releasing that tension and produce some endorphins our 'feel good' hormones.
- On home leave it can often be tempting to binge on all those foods we can't enjoy so easily in Doha. This is the time to recognise that there is a choice in this matter - your choice! Do you allow yourself a small treat now and then, eating and enjoying slowly? Or do you allow yourself to stock up your stomach for the next year with treats and then spend the following year attempting to lose all that extra weight?
- Two months of enjoying time with your children and spending so much time with friends and family without a moment to yourself can be wonderful and also exhausting. Not only for yourself but also for your children. Ensure that each of you has some peaceful time alone. Listen to some calming music or take some time to read for pleasure. Even a five minute break to collect your thoughts can allow you to feel calm and refreshed. Try the exercise below whether you are somewhere peaceful and quiet or you are resorting to stealing some extra time in the toilet.

- One of the most important ways that you need to look after yourself is to maintain healthy sleep patterns. Lack of sleep will reduce your immune system, increase cortisol levels and sugar cravings.

Holiday Emotions

While being on a home-leave holiday gives us the chance to relax and reconnect with important people in our lives, it can also raise some difficult emotions. There can be unresolved family issues or the recent loss of a loved one all of which can feel more 'real'. There can be family obligations and expectations that you should feel a certain way when there. Many of these feelings will be very normal ones for eg. sadness after a loss but if they become overwhelming or difficult to deal with then don't be embarrassed to ask for help or support. If you know that for some reason this holiday will be a challenging time, acknowledge that to yourself and plan some time for yourself doing activities which you know in the past have helped you to feel better.

The Exercise

Close your eyes

Allow yourself to become aware of your breath

Don't try to change your breath, just be aware of it

Just notice your breath flowing in and out of your body

Your breath will tend to naturally become slower and deeper with your awareness of it

Notice your abdomen rising and falling
If any thoughts drift into your mind, just gently return your awareness to your breath

Allow any other thoughts to just flow in and out of your mind

When you are ready, slowly open your eyes

Take a moment or two before continuing with your day feeling refreshed.

Have a great holiday! Remember this is your time, relax and have fun. ●