

S'pore a refuge for globalised citizens

As the Singapore diaspora grows, some are also returning home temporarily, between spending months or years abroad



Venessa Lee

In recent years, Ms Mariana Ahmad, 38, has lived and worked in places like Belfast, Georgia and Istanbul.

After university, she worked in the television and infocommunications industry in Singapore for eight years before heading to Europe.

In between stints abroad where she worked in hostels and did voluntary work, travelled and taught English, she returned here in 2011 to earn money.

"I have contacts, I know who to talk to, I know the job market. I know that if anything adverse happens, I can always return to Singapore and get a job," says Ms Mariana, who now lives in Helsinki, Finland. She married a Finnish software developer last year.

Ms Mariana exemplifies the "revolving door" dynamics in an increasingly globalised Singaporean diaspora, which has grown steadily for at least 10 years, experts say.

Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, says: "Overseas Sin-

gaporeans may be coming back but they might move abroad again, if other opportunities come round."

The number of Singaporeans living overseas increased nearly 20 per cent between 2008 and last year — from 181,900 to 216,400, figures from the Department of Statistics show.

There is no data available for the number of Singaporeans who have returned home from living abroad.

Dr Aidan Wong, Assistant Professor of Humanities (Education) at Singapore Management University, says a burgeoning diaspora is not surprising as the Government has been emphasising the Republic's need for a globalised outlook since the 1990s.

In the short term, however, Singapore may be viewed as a refuge in uncertain times, such as now, with the trade dispute between China and the United States, an unpredictable political situation in the US, Brexit and the unrest in Hong Kong, says Dr Wong.

"Safety considerations are particularly significant for overseas Singaporeans with families. They may come back to Singapore for a sojourn, then leave for another country once socio-economic and political certainties become more assured," he says.

The ease of returning typically depends on one's line of work.

Since 2014, Robert Walters Singapore, a recruitment consultancy, has been running Balik Kampung, a programme that helps overseas Singaporeans find work and move back to Singapore.

Ms Ivy Low, the firm's International Candidate Manager who oversees the programme, says: "Candidates for technology jobs, for instance, know that their skills are

very transferable. I'm seeing more of such candidates wanting to come back to Singapore earlier, who are in their late 20s, compared with their late 30s, previously.

"They are thinking about having a shot at the local market and may consider going back to the US later."

Freelancers like Ms Crunch Rajandran, 30, also find it easy to work both overseas and in Singapore.

Upon graduating from Singapore Management University, the Singaporean taught English at an enrichment centre here for a year until 2013.

She then spent more than a year travelling in North and South America, followed by a year-long stint teaching English in Costa Rica.

After that, she wrote content for American and Canadian websites, while living in countries like Laos and India for weeks or months at a time.

In 2016, Ms Crunch left Panama to live in Singapore for three months to help her older sister care for her newborn and toddler. Last year, she returned from Borneo and spent seven months taking care of her mother who had surgery.

"My flexible schedule leaves me relatively free to fulfil my duties and obligations. There is no need for me to take half-days off and I continue to work when I'm in Singapore," says Ms Crunch, speaking to The Sunday Times by telephone from the Mexican city of Guanajuato.

There are many reasons to come home, temporarily or otherwise.

Overwhelmingly, though, overseas Singaporeans return for their families, says Ms Low from Robert Walters Singapore.

"People often come back for the sake of their ageing parents or their

children's education," she says. Conversely, family considerations can also compel returnees to move back overseas.

Ms Janell Lia-Breitmayer, 45, relocated to the south of Germany in 1999 after marrying a German citizen. He was later posted to Singapore in 2007 on account of his job in the pharmaceutical industry. The couple, who have two children aged 14 and 16, returned to Singapore for five years.

After they went back to Germany in 2012, however, their marriage broke down.

"As a Singaporean who had relocated overseas because of marriage, I had completely leaned on our marriage," says Ms Lia-Breitmayer. A housewife for 14 years, she had to build a career as a foreigner and start a new life as a single mum.

She had not had the time or opportunity to form deep friendships as her family had moved frequently in Germany because of her former husband's work.

"My father told me to come home, but my children would have to change their mother tongue from German to English," says Ms Lia-Breitmayer, who now works in Stuttgart as an educational consultant at the Youth Foundation of the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg.

She did not want to put her daughter and son, who are in German schools, through such upheaval.

She says: "I would like to return to Singapore in the long term. It's friends, family, my childhood, the smells, the trees, the food."

"I have two homes, Singapore and Germany, but my homeland 'heimat' in German — is Singapore."

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Digital nomad Crunch Rajandran (left in a photo taken in Xochimilco, Mexico) has a flexible writing career that takes her around the world. She can return to Singapore when she needs to, such as to take care of her mother. PHOTO COURTESY OF CRUNCH RAJANDRAN



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MS JANELL LIA-BREITMAYER (above), who is still living in Germany for the sake of her two teenage children after divorcing her German husband. The single mum now works in Stuttgart as an educational consultant, but hopes to return eventually.

WHY THEY RETURN HOME



Mr Richard Kuppasamy (in this 2018 file photo) says he built a successful architectural career in the UK, but returned home in 2012 for better job prospects. Though his skills are portable, he says his family keeps him here. ST FILE PHOTO

Here for family, but the disabled still face barriers

Mr Richard Kuppasamy earned three degrees in architecture and had a successful career in the United Kingdom, where he lived for 16 years, mainly in Scotland.

But the 42-year-old chose to return to Singapore for better work prospects in 2012.

The financial crisis in the late 2000s in the UK left people struggling to keep their jobs. Within three years, his architectural firm downsized from 370 employees to fewer than 120, he says.

He felt he was not advancing in his career despite specialising in a sought-after area of expertise: building information modelling

(BIM), a 3D model-based process that enhances the planning, design, construction and management of buildings and infrastructure. He was "ready for a fresh start" in Singapore and also wanted to spend more time with his ageing parents.

Since his return, he has worked on projects such as the award-winning Kampung Admiralty complex, which integrates residences, shops, healthcare and other facilities, and childcare and eldercare centres.

Now head of digital engineering for Asia at Lendlease, an international property group, he is also president of the Disabled People's Association (DPA). Born with spina bifida, a condition where the spine and spinal cord do not form properly, he has been using a wheelchair since he was 24.

Mr Kuppasamy, who has a fiancée, says he could not have returned earlier, due to accessibility issues the disabled face here. Whenever he came home for Christmas, he faced barriers that made him feel like "a second-class citizen", such as a lack of wheelchair-accessible public toilets.

"But in 2012, the possibility of re-booting my career outweighed the struggle to be able to live here. It

took that many years to build up a specialist skillset and a reputation so that people here would have to see beyond my disability," he says.

But while the physical infrastructure has improved, he laments that social barriers remain for people with disability. Even buying shoes is challenging, with salespeople in shoe shops unwilling to help him, he says, adding "even people in wheelchairs need shoes".

As such, he says he may consider working elsewhere in the future. "My skills are portable and I work in an MNC, which is portable. What's keeping me here is I really love my job and I have family."

Singaporeans who lived abroad tell Venessa Lee why they move back



Dr Faye Lim (with her daughter Elena, husband Chan Jin Hoe and son Alisdair in London during the school holidays in June this year) came back to Singapore for her children. PHOTO COURTESY OF FAYE LIM

Kids need sense of belonging

The United Kingdom felt like home for Dr Faye Lim, who had lived there for 20 years.

She studied there as a teenager, entered medical school and worked in hospitals there. But after her first child was born, the radiation oncologist and her ophthalmologist husband decided to return to Singapore because they wanted to give their son "a sense of belonging".

Dr Lim, 44, and Dr Chan Jin Hoe, 48, a Malaysian permanent resident, have two children, Alisdair, nine, and Elena, seven. They moved from London to Singapore eight years ago. The couple's parents live in Singapore.

Dr Lim, who has three younger siblings, says: "We wanted our

children to know where they came from. They're not British. We wanted them to appreciate their culture, their family. They will know where home is, even if they go out to explore the rest of the world later."

The sound educational system here was another draw. "In some ways, education in the UK is no different from Singapore. It's competitive. People move here to get into good schools. They enrol their children in enrichment classes to get ahead. And private education is expensive," she says.

"The reality is, the pull of family is very strong. You have to come back to look after your parents," she adds.

They want their children to have Chinese lessons

Mr Ernie Voon, 41, decided to return to Singapore just three years into his first overseas posting.

Ironically, Chinese lessons — which have made some people here want to flee the education system — was the chief pull factor back.

"We think it is important to be bilingual because we're Singaporean," says Mr Voon, who moved to the Netherlands in 2015 on a job posting with Nike, a multinational sportswear company he worked with for 12 years.

He and his homemaker wife Ca-ryn Lim, 39, had tried homeschooling their elder daughter Natasha, who attended international school there, in Chinese. But they had little success.

Natasha, now eight, would wave her hands and say "bu zhi dao" ("I don't know" in Mandarin). Their younger daughter Naomi is four.

Mr Voon had initially been daunted by the pressures of the education system in Singapore. But recent moves by the Education Ministry, such as the scrapping of examinations for Primary 1 and 2 pupils, made him "feel more comfortable" about bringing his family home.

He landed a new job through Balik Kampung, a returnee programme run by recruitment firm Robert Walters Singapore. Initially apprehensive about switching jobs at 40, he is now general manager of the professional products division at global beauty brand L'Oréal, where he had worked early in his career.

The family returned last year when Natasha started Primary 1.

Watching the National Day Parade preview here last year, he recounts, "I felt super emotional and teared up. You realise that you missed Singapore when you weren't here."



Adapting to intense pace here

In 2015, Mr Ian Chan received an emergency phone call from his dad's doctor, who said his elderly father had a kidney infection and might not pull through.

It got the Singaporean, the eldest son in the family, thinking about coming home.

In 2017, he and his wife Janice Chua packed up, after living in the United States for 19 years, and returned here to spend more time with their respective families.

Seven months later, Mr Chan's father died at age 75.

Although the couple's decision to return was unequivocal, Mr Chan, 49, an electronics engineer, found it challenging to find a commensurate job here. "The pay wasn't comparable," he says.

He eventually found a job that matched his salary in the US, at a firm that makes customised electronic systems.

But he had to get used to the different work culture here. His company in the US had a laidback, "graduate school" atmosphere, which revolved around collegial discussions on work and research.

He had to get used to eating lunch at his desk and a more intense pace of work in Singapore.

His wife, who used to work in banking and sold her cafe business in California before returning, found it hard to forge a new career.

Ms Chua, also 49, says: "In California where I had set up a cafe, I felt like I was somebody. I was a business owner and I advocated for small businesses. Here, I was a nobody."

"I had to start all over again. Though I was coming back to my home town, I felt like a stranger."

Eventually, realising that she liked interacting with people and making a difference in their lives, she retrained as a life coach and started her own coaching business.

Two years on, the couple are getting more comfortable here. But it is still an effort to make friends, as it is challenging to find common areas of conversation. Unlike many of their peers, they do not have children.

But both say Singapore is finally feeling more like home. "I'm not looking to go back. We'll be here until we retire," says Mr Chan.

After living in the United States for 19 years, Mr Ian Chan and his wife Janice Chua had to adapt to the different work culture here, but they want to be here till they retire. ST PHOTO DESMOND FOO

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Mr Ernie Voon (with his wife Ca-ryn Lim, and daughters Natasha and Naomi) brought his family back to Singapore from Holland because he wanted his children to learn Chinese and be bilingual. PHOTO: COURTESY OF ERNIE VOON

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