

Leaving the comfort zone - an expat life in Alabama

“Birmingham, Alabama – where exactly is that?” was my first question when my husband came home one day from work, telling me that his company offered him a job as President and CEO of their American subsidiary.

I have been to the USA numerous times for private or business purposes, mainly to the East and to the West coast. Alabama only crossed my life once with the “Sweet Home Alabama” movie. As I have an inherent desire to analyze things before making decisions, I said “Let’s see it first.” Fortunately, we had an upcoming vacation planned in Florida. So, we took some days to go to Birmingham and we were positively surprised by the city, the nice neighborhoods, the very friendly people, the landscape, the great food and the weather. Nine months later, in July 2017, we started our new life as so-called expats in Birmingham, Alabama.

Many say that the women and the kids have the more difficult part of the expat-experience and I fully agree with that. Most of the expats are men and they will soon find themselves back in a familiar environment with a structured working day in the office, with co-workers, with meetings and so on. However, it is the women who must re-invent their own lives. Suddenly, there is no more job, family and friends are thousands of miles away and there are a lot of new everyday challenges.

First week challenges

One of our first challenges was to camp in our new house on inflatables for a couple of weeks. We only had a suitcase each when we arrived. The rest of our entire household was stuck in a container in U.S. customs for longer than expected. I still remember how euphoric we felt when our belongings finally arrived. Our to do list was loaded with tasks like signing up for electricity, Wi-Fi, TV and trash removal, applying for a US driver’s license and social security number, opening a bank account, obtaining insurance and getting a phone contract. Unexpectedly, all of this is quite a challenge when you don’t have a credit history in this country!

For our nine-year-old daughter our new life was challenging, too. She did not speak English before we got here. Searching the internet showed that it may take about six months to understand and nine months to speak the language. Surprisingly, it did not even take that long. After only three months she was able to easily follow the lessons and at the end of her first year she got one of the best report cards of her class. Relieved and very proud parents!

Getting used to cultural differences and local customs

Books with titles like “A Deep Insight into American Culture” or “Culture Shock America” – I read them all. Even books describing us Germans were on my reading list. Doing so I realized how German I actually am. I never thought so before. Instead, I considered myself rather cosmopolitan after living abroad during my days as a student. However, I found that I carry many German values and attitudes.

I certainly value many of the typical American habits and behaviors: First, the friendliness and politeness, especially here in the south. The southern hospitality made it very easy for us to adjust to our new environment. Additionally, I really enjoy the typical American optimistic attitude to life. Compared to us reserved Germans, Americans seem to be more relaxed and certainly more open and outgoing. However, sometimes I still have problems to decrypt a message. In contrast to the direct Germans, Americans are masters in sugar coating criticism. And so, I still wonder what it means when my neighbor says, “your house looks very European.”

After more than one year I am now quite familiar with customs like tipping or doing small talk. However, there is barely a day I do not experience something new or different to Germany. Either a visit to the pediatrician, the school system, paying bills, dealing with authorities, or dealing with the empirical measurements.

Leaving the loved ones behind

Let's face it. It's not easy to leave family and friends behind and move 5000 miles away from them. Of course, we cried several times when saying goodbye. However, it turns out, that in the end we spend more quality time with them than before. We usually travel back home for the summer and for the Christmas holidays. Besides, many family members and friends have already visited us. So, we are not able anymore to meet for a drink during the week, but we see each other for a longer time - and then we even live under one roof. Moreover, Facetime or Skype do not care about the Atlantic Ocean between the two continents. The only thing you must consider is the seven-hour time difference. Now my daughter says "good night" to grandma and grandpa when she comes home from school.

Reinventing yourself

Ever since I graduated from university I was working. For over 17 years, I progressed through different top management positions at Infineon Technologies, a global semiconductor supplier with 36,000 employees worldwide. As "Director of Marketing and Communications" I successfully led numerous communications-, marketing and strategy projects. To a large extent I was defining myself by my job. Suddenly I was a "stay at home mom" and my self-image was confused. Obviously, I really enjoy spending more time with my daughter now. During the very busy days in my old life I longed to have more time for her or even time for quite ordinary things like shopping or organizing my wardrobe.

However, I still feel the desire to have "my own thing". That's why I am currently setting up my own business – combining my broad professional and my private experiences – thus living the American dream. [Marketing and communications on demand, cultural training, project support and assistance in relocation is what I will offer.](#) I am really looking forward to working on new projects and meeting new people.

Would I do it again?

My friends often ask me if I would make the same decision to go abroad again. My answer is always "yes". The expatriate life is a tremendous opportunity and privilege for me and my family, but it is also hard work and it requires you to get out of your comfort zone. During the last months I have learned one thing: I know that I can make a home almost anywhere in the world. It takes time, a lot of energy, courage, open-mindedness and curiosity but at the end it is an incredible adventure, an unforgettable experience and an amazing enrichment.