EXPAT LIVING

Magazine of the Expat Network

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CURRENCY QUESTIONS

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A JOB IN AZERBAIJAN?

Oil brings many foreign workers here, but what are conditions like?

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Retiring to Spain and concerned how much tax you might pay?

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Welcome To **Expat Living**

In this edition of *Expat Living* we have brought together a range of features and news which address the expat experience.

We first examine what it is like to live and work in Azerbaijan. We also look at prospects if you are considering a move to the United States.

Plus, how should you manage your foreign exchange? Do you need to consider high-risk insurance?

We hope this e-magazine brings you the essential information you need for your life overseas.

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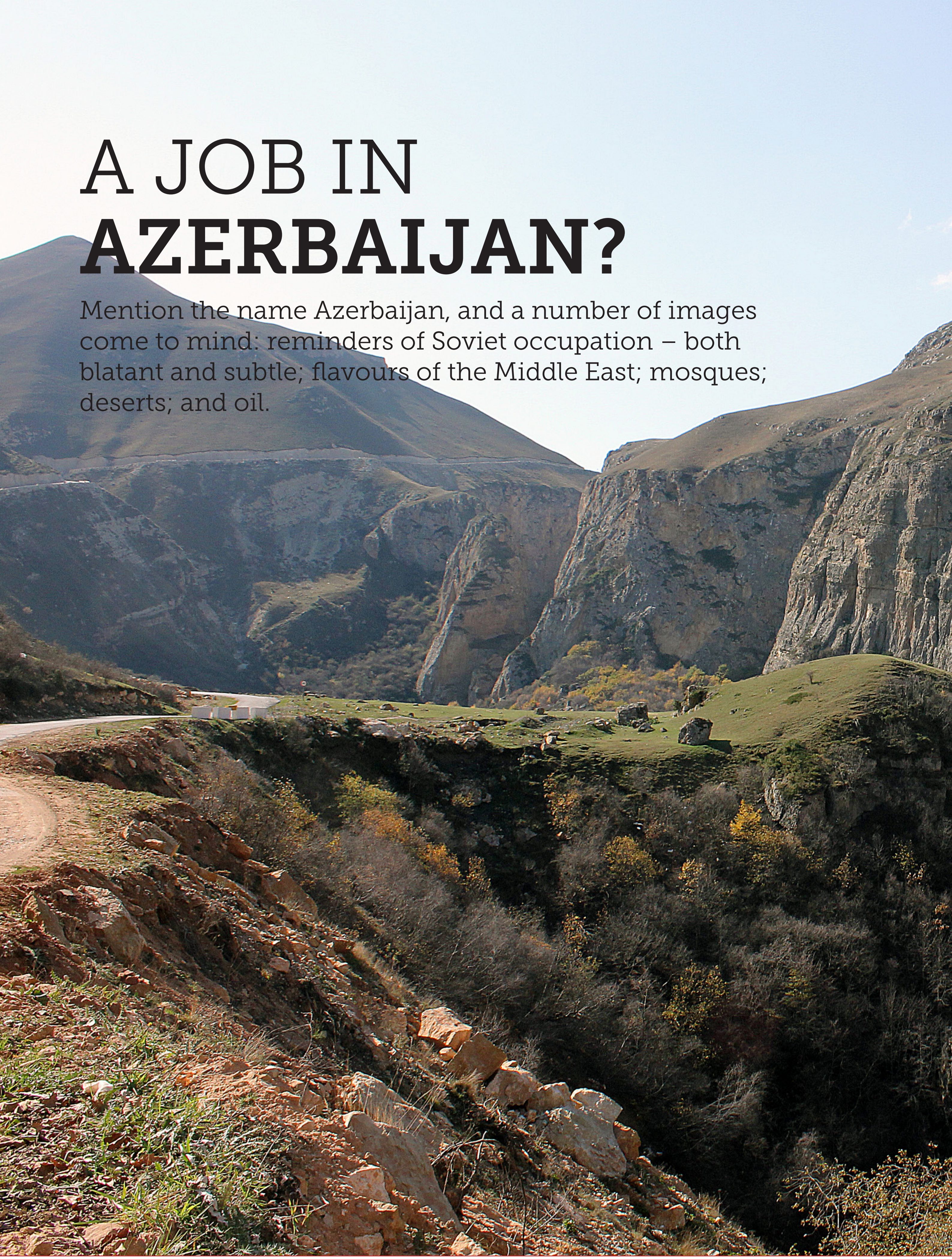


A JOB IN **AZERBAIJAN?**

Mention the name Azerbaijan, and a number of images come to mind: reminders of Soviet occupation – both blatant and subtle; flavours of the Middle East; mosques; deserts; and oil.

Oil is usually uppermost in the minds of expats moving to Azerbaijan, as it is the industry most likely to relocate people there. Azerbaijan has counted on its tremendous natural resources to transition to a market economy from one run by the state.

Most Azeris are well aware of the need for foreign investment to stabilise and grow their economy. This attitude fosters an acceptance of foreigners that complements Azeris' natural warmth and hospitality.

Oil has attracted people to Azerbaijan for centuries. The Soviets were just one example, when they claimed the land in 1920. Oil reserves were exploited; plants and refineries were built at the expense of the environment around Baku.

Since independence in 1991 Azerbaijan has faced many challenges. Transitioning to a market economy from one run by the state has been a task faced by other former Soviet countries. Azerbaijan at least has tremendous natural resources at its disposal, but prosperity still is not as widespread as many had hoped.

Economic reforms and foreign investment in oil, natural gas and chemicals are seen as necessary to stabilise and grow the economy.

Instability in the Nagorno-Karabakh region – an area fought over by Azeris and Armenians – originally served to deter foreign investment and dampen expectations for a swift improvement in economic conditions.

Some 70 per cent of state-owned enterprises were targeted for privatisation, among them banking, electricity and agriculture. Privatisation started with small entities and housing, since previously residents had not owned their own property but rather merely rented from the government. SOCAR, the national oil company, is still wholly owned by the government. Lack of private capital and process inefficiencies have hampered large-scale privatisation.

Still, improvements have come. A group of foreign oil companies signed a US$7.4 billion, 20-year deal with Azerbaijan in 1994. Whether because of government efforts or in spite of them, the 45 per cent of the population once living below the poverty line has been reduced to just over five per cent.

Inflation, over 1,600 per cent in the early 1990s after independence, fell to less than one per cent just a few years later. By early 2015, inflation was around three per cent. During the same span of time, GDP growth was strong and foreign investment swelled. Commitments to privatisation and reducing poverty have realised results.

A Soviet Republic since the 1920s, Azerbaijan came to Joseph Stalin's attention during World War II. In 1945 Stalin attempted to join Azerbaijan with northern Iran, which has a large population of Azeris. Rebuffed by Allied forces, Stalin retreated.

A Communist party first secretary at the time, Heydar Aliyev, would become the country's longest-standing elected official. President Aliyev took over the presidency for the fleeing Abulfaz Elchibey in 1993, and was elected to a second term in 1998. He is credited with making strides toward peace in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Ilham Aliyev was elected to succeed his father, Heydar, in 2003, amid questions about the standards of the election process. Two elections later, Aliyev is still in power, though the latest election results, in 2013, were accidentally announced before voting actually took place. There are no term limits.

As a republic, Azerbaijan has an elected president and prime minister. The president is elected for a five-year term; all citizens age 18 and over may vote. There is a 125-member National Assembly, Milli Majlis. One hundred members are elected to five-year terms; 25 members are elected by proportional representation.

Several political parties are represented. Among them are the current president's Yeni/New Azerbaijan Party (YAP), a reform party; Civil Solidarity Party (CSP); Motherland Party and Azerbaijan Popular Front (APF).

Location & Borders

Azerbaijan lies on the Caspian Sea in southwest Asia. It borders four countries and the Caspian Sea. The sea forms its eastern border; Iran is to the south; Armenia is west; Georgia is northwest; and Dagestan (Russian Federation) is to the north.

A few small Azerbaijani islands lie off the coast in the Caspian Sea, scene of huge new construction projects.

A small piece of territory, the Azerbaijan Nakhichevan exclave, is separated from the rest of the country. This area is surrounded by Armenia and Iran, and has a tiny border - about 9 km/6 mi - with Turkey. A roughly 50 km/31 mi strip of Armenia separates Nakhichevan from the rest of Azerbaijan.

Conflict with Armenia over land to the northeast of Nakhichevan - known as the Nagorno-Karabakh region - have produced hundreds of thousands of refugees from the area.

The Caucacus range produces mountainous terrain in north central Azerbaijan and along its western border with Armenia. Elevation in the country varies from 4,740 meters/15,550 ft above sea level in the mountains, to 28 metres/92 ft below sea level at the coast. There are eight major rivers.

The richest farmland lies mainly on the southeastern coast, where tea leaves, oranges, and lemons are grown. Less than 20 per cent of the country is arable.

Baku, the capital city, is situated on the Apsheron Peninsula, which is shaped like a bird's beak jutting out into the Caspian Sea.

History

Azerbaijan is an ancient land with a long and complex history. The country has undergone numerous changes in its borders and ruling people. For most of its history, power struggles and tensions were the norm.

Originally inhabited around 3000 B.C. by various tribes, Azerbaijan became part of the Persian Empire around 500 B.C. The country name originates from the Persian word 'azer' - meaning 'fire'.

Romans soon invaded the region. They were eventually driven out - by about 100 A.D. - but not before influencing the local culture with their architecture and religion, the latter by introducing Christianity.

As a result of subsequent Arab invasions, Islam was firmly entrenched in the area by the middle of the 600s A.D. Shia Islam was imposed - in many cases with violence - in favour of Sunni Islam.

Not until nearly 1750 was Persia's grip on Azerbaijan relaxed. Independent territories established themselves, and soon became targets for Russian invasion. Beginning in the late 1700s, Russia struggled with Persia for sovereignty over parts of the Caucasus region.

The borders recognised today were set down in 1828, after a decisive Russian victory. During the period of Russian rule over Azerbaijan, oil was exported but little was invested in the area or its people. Still, Baku thrived as an oil centre, and Azeris tried their best to resist Russian control.

Following further conflicts among different groups and a brief period of independence, Azerbaijan fell under the rule of the Soviet Union in 1922, and remained so until 1991.

Russian tanks descended on Baku in January 1990, ostensibly to protect the city from Armenians, but in reality causing a hundred Azeri deaths. Referred to as 'Black January', this event turned popular sentiment firmly against the Russians.

When the U.S.S.R. collapsed in 1991, Azerbaijan gained its independence, though it was mired in conflict with Armenia over disputed territory to the southwest. Armenians drove an attack through a strip of land, a move that would sever the Nakhichevan region from the rest of Azerbaijan.

Membership to the United Nations came in 1992, while conflict with Armenia continued. Heydar Aliyev took over the presidency in 1993, then was elected to a second term in 1998. Early in his tenure - 1994 - a US$7.4 billion investment deal was signed with three oil companies. A 1994 cease-fire with Armenia has been honoured for the most part, although that conflict has not been fully resolved.

Ilham Aliyev, Heydar's son, was elected president - despite rumblings of unfair election practices - in 2003 with his father's death.

With foreign investment pouring in, and certain reforms taking root, Azerbaijan looks toward a promising future as an oil-producer.

Azerbaijanis - or Azeris as they are also called - are an ancient people dating back to 3000 B.C. It is a very homogeneous society: about 90 percent of the country's population is ethnic Azeri. The remaining 10 per cent is comprised of Russians, Armenians, Turks, Kurds and other nationalities. Armenians live chiefly in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, land fought over by Azeris and Armenians. Population growth is just under 0.3 per cent. The average family has 2.2 children. About 55 per cent of the population is between the ages of 16 and 54. Twenty-eight per cent of the population is under age 15, 10 per cent is between 55 and 65, and seven per cent is over 65.

Culture & Religion

Residents of Azerbaijan speak Azeri, the national language, which is similar to Turkish. Many also speak Russian. The written language underwent changes both during Soviet rule and after. The alphabet was changed from Arabic to Roman when the Soviets took control in the 1920s. In the 1930s it was changed from Roman to Cyrillic. Now Roman script is being phased back into use. You may see the language written in the Roman or Cyrillic alphabet. Government publications are still printed in both Russian and Azeri.

The country enjoys a high literacy rate - 97 per cent - a commendable rate, considering the country's large rural population of agricultural workers.

Islam is the dominant religion in the country, although citizens are free to follow whatever religion they wish. Russian Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox churches also have followings, and there is a small Jewish population. On the whole, Azeris are not overly religious, having undergone years of Soviet rule during which Islam was discouraged. More and more Azeris are practicing Muslims since independence, as they are free to revisit their religious roots and restore traditional family values. About 70 per cent of Azeri Muslims are Shi'ites; 30 per cent are Sunni Muslims.

Azerbaijan is known for its beautiful carpets. Baku has a carpet museum, where newcomers can learn the intricacies of this traditional art form. A prayer rug, for example - or namazlig - typically has a small arrow embedded in the design; the arrow should face Mecca as the owner kneels on the rug to pray.

During the long period of Soviet rule, two full generations of Azeris lost touch somewhat with their national traditions. Certain traits have prevailed, however. A strong sense of national pride, love of local culture and language and a deep commitment to family are values shared by many Azeris. Azeris are very hospitable to each other and newcomers.

Visitors are treated with wonderful hospitality - and often offered the very best a family has to offer. Given the country's relative dearth of services, people have come to rely on one another. Neighbours and friends always know someone who can perform a necessary service - be it piano lessons, haircuts, or tax preparation. Understandably, networking and personal contacts are very important in Azerbaijan. Education also is important, thanks in part to the Soviet presence, during which the country claimed a 100 per cent literacy rate.

Azeris are generally aware of goings-on in the region, due to their long history of changing borders and rule by outsiders. Residents of the capital have a worldly view and are accustomed to international visitors and businesspeople. People living in rural areas - about 46 per cent of the country - have less access to information and are less informed about world events. Most Azeris are well aware of the need for foreign investment to stabilise and grow their economy. This attitude fosters an acceptance of foreigners that complements Azeris' natural warmth and hospitality.

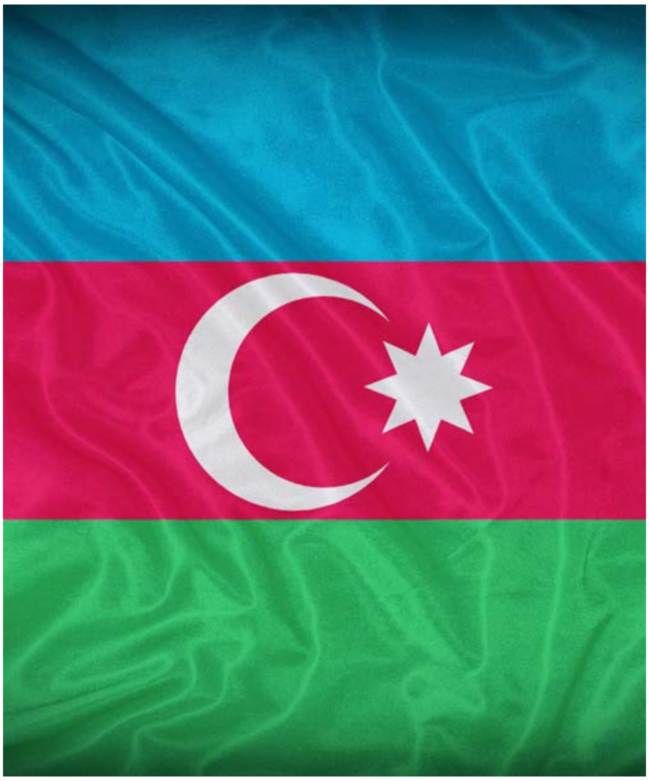
Climate

Azerbaijan's climate varies by season and region. Summers are hot - 40°C/104°F - and humid in low-lying areas such as coastal Baku. In mountainous regions summers are milder, and snow is frequent in winter. Baku's winters can be cold - but not excessively so - typically 4°C/39°F. Snow is rare in the capital.

Rainfall is infrequent in most parts of the country. The heaviest rains fall in the Lenkoran Lowlands, the southern region near the border with Iran. Travellers driving through rain should take care to monitor road conditions, as poor conditions can become much worse as rain drenches unpaved roads.

Coastal Azerbaijan is quite humid all year. Humidity levels are steady around 70 pe rcent for most of the year, although it may drop below 60 per cent occasionally. Residents and workers in Baku dress in keeping with the warm weather; layers are recommended. While clothing styles follow Western standards, women should take particular care to dress.

The capital city of Baku is known for its tremendous winds, which blow through with great force a few times each month. Winds come either from the Caspian Sea to the south, or from inland areas to the west and northwest. Although they cause residents to secure outdoor items, the winds often provide relief from summer's oppressive humidity. In winter also, the winds drop the temperature, but the added chill is not as welcome then.



Travel Advisory

The UK's Foreign & Commonwealth Office had issued travel advisories for Azerbaijan.

The FCO advise against all travel to:

- Nagorno-Karabakh and the military occupied area surrounding it
- within 5km of the Line of Contact
- within 5km of the border with Armenia.

Tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh continue. Several ceasefire violations along the Line of Contact separating the opposing forces and elsewhere on the inter-state border between Azerbaijan and Armenia have taken place in 2017, resulting in a number of deaths and casualties.

Anyone who has visited Nagorno-Karabakh without the permission of the Azerbaijani authorities will be refused entry to Azerbaijan.

All British nationals travelling to Azerbaijan must get a visa in advance.

Terrorists are likely to try to carry out attacks in Azerbaijan. Around 7,000 British nationals visit Azerbaijan every year, mainly on business. Most visits are trouble free.

CURRENCY **QUESTIONS**

How do expats make sure they are not losing money unnecessarily when making foreign exchange transactions?

The best way to send money overseas depends on a number of factors including:

- How much you are sending.
- How much it is going to cost.
- How often you are sending it.
- How the person wants to receive it.
- How quickly the money needs to get there.

There are three main options for sending money:

- Bank or building society.
- Foreign exchange (FX) brokers.
- High street transfer firms.

As a rule - banks are safe and convenient for regular payments. Transfer firms are very fast, but can be more expensive if you're sending smaller amounts. FX brokers are normally the best option if you're sending larger amounts, usually over £3,000.

Find out the total amount of foreign currency your pounds will buy, after all costs.

How much it's going to cost you to transfer money abroad is obviously important. The costs are in three parts:

- Foreign exchange rates.
- What the firm will charge you for transferring the money.
- Charges the recipient might have to cover to receive the money (but you can ask to cover these at your end).

An easy way to start is to get a quote from your bank to compare it to others, including quotes from FX brokers using a site like FX Compared.

Once you have found the best value option, you will need to confirm the company can handle the amount you want to transfer and in the time frame you want. If possible, make sure you get this in writing (by post or email).

You might also want to check if your money transfer firm or FX broker is Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) authorised. If you're sending a lot of money, it's good to know you're protected.

Using A Bank

Your bank or building society is always able to transfer money and is a safe and convenient way to send money overseas. But there are pros and cons.

- Easy to arrange – your bank will guide you through the process and you might even be able to make transfers from your mobile phone.
- Convenient – banks and building societies are on the high street and you can set up a transfer as a regular payment.
- Safe and secure - you will be protected when you send money overseas using a UK bank or building society.
- For amounts over £5,000, you're more likely to get a better exchange rate from a foreign exchange broker.
- Not the fastest option. Standard transfer takes four to six business days, but you can pay extra for an express service which takes one to two days. Some foreign banks charge for receiving the transfer. You can ask your bank to cover all the charges so the recipient gets the full amount.

If you need to send regular payments overseas for your own use, the cheapest and easiest transfer option is likely to be setting up an account with the overseas branch of your UK bank. Many UK high street banks have their own branches overseas or special arrangements with overseas banks. This can result in lower charges (or no charges) on overseas payments as well as more competitive exchange rates. This is particularly useful if you need to make frequent payments abroad – as when, for example, you're paying the bills on a second home abroad. To benefit from the reduced fees, you often need to hold an account in the same name in both countries.

Using A Money Transfer Firm

Finding a money transfer firm to help you send money abroad is easy. Some, like Western Union, have high street branches, many offer online services and you can find MoneyGram in Post Office branches.

There are pros and cons to using a money transfer firm.

- Range of services – some offer instant cash for your recipient, others can transfer money directly into a bank account.
- Easy set-up – you don't usually need an account. For smaller amounts, you might not even need identification.
- Fast – a cash transfer can be completed in a few minutes. Sending from a bank account can take several days.
- Fees vary widely - depending on the service you choose and can be especially high for smaller amounts – you could end up paying £10 to transfer just £50.
- Exchange rates can vary daily and according to currency, so make sure you compare costs on the day you plan to send the money. You can often do this online.
- Not as safe – the Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS) does not cover these firms if they go bust.

The best way to compare costs is to calculate the final amount of euros, dollars or other currency you'll get after the exchange rate and all charges have been taken into account.

How it works:

- You can find a money transfer service through a high street agent, in newsagents or at the Post Office.
- You generally don't need to open an account. Simply hand over the funds you want to send and pay any fees.
- After paying you'll get a reference number – give this to the recipient (and only the recipient). Whoever has the number can pick up the money you sent to the overseas branch or agency.

Before handing over your cash:

- Check the fees – these services can be fast, but expensive.
- If sending 'instant cash' abroad, find out where the money can be collected. Then check with your recipient to make sure they'll be able to get to that branch or agency. Increasingly, you might be able to send cash to a recipient's mobile-phone 'wallet' if they have one (using systems such as M-PESA).

Using An FX Broker

If you're looking to send a large sum of money overseas, you'll probably get the best deal from a foreign exchange (FX) currency broker.

There are pros and cons.

- Low fees – if transferring over £3,000, FX brokers won't usually charge you fees.
- Great exchange rate – FX brokers specialise in currency transaction and will likely offer a better exchange rate than a bank or money transfer firm.
- Fast – money will usually be in the recipient's bank account the same, or following day.
- Regular payments – some FX brokers will deal with regular transfers.
- Opening an account – to make a transfer with an FX broker, you will need to open and pay into an account. This can take a day or two.

- Smaller amounts – FX brokers are not generally best for sending smaller amounts of money.
- Not as safe – the Financial Services Compensation Scheme does not cover these firms if they go bust.

You can choose to send money abroad using the current exchange rate. However, if you're worried about exchange rate changes for a future amount you're planning to send, consider a 'forward contract' to lock in the exchange rate for a future trade.

Forwards are useful if you know you'll need a large sum of cash at some point in the future.

For example, if you know you'll need to cover the down payment on a holiday home in Spain but are worried about the pound weakening or the euro strengthening before it's time to send the money, this method will let you lock in a rate.

Safety

Always check whether your money transfer firm is authorised or registered by the FCA. All UK-based firms handling overseas money transfers must be either 'authorised' or 'registered' by the FCA.

While authorisation means there are certain safeguards on your money, you still won't be covered by the Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS).

So if the firm you're using fails and can't pay back all the money it owes you, you won't be able to get compensation through the scheme.

Firms authorised by the FCA need to safeguard your money by keeping it separate from company funds. So if the firm goes bust, you are more likely to get your money back. All larger firms must be authorised.

Smaller firms can choose to be registered rather than authorised. Registration is a much weaker level of protection, since the firm just needs to show the FCA that it's based in the UK and that none of its managers have been convicted of financial crimes. Registered firms might choose to safeguard your money, but they don't have to do so by law.

Authorised and registered firms both have to follow the FCA's rules about how they deal with customers, for example having a complaints procedure.

The FCA keeps a list of all authorised and registered firms at www.fca.org.uk. If a firm isn't on the register it's not necessarily bad news. It might be because the firm is based in another country instead of the UK.

Check the firm's paperwork – it should give the details of which country has authorised the firm. If a firm isn't registered with the FCA – or another EU regulator – you should avoid it, as it might be operating illegally.

A safe and legal money transfer firm or broker should give you plenty of information – in writing – before and after you make a payment.

You should get documents telling you:

- What exchange rate will be used.
- What charges and fees to expect.
- A reference number for completed transfers.
- How the person you're sending money to can collect it.
- Confirmation of the transaction details, including the final cost and exchange rate and how long it will take for the money to be transferred.

If a firm loses your money – or you have another complaint – the first step is to get in touch with them and give them the chance to make things right. If they can't sort your problem out, you can bring your complaint to the Financial Ombudsman Service.

They'll investigate and if they find the firm has been unfair, the Ombudsman has the power to order them to repay you the money you have lost.

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MOVING TO **AMERICA**

First of all, you will need a valid passport and visa to enter the USA. For citizens of all countries, every family member should have his or her own passport. Expiration dates should be six months or more beyond the expected end date of a visit to the United States.

Visitors should be in good health unless entering the country specifically for medical treatment. US entry is now controlled by the US Citizenship & Immigration Service (USCIS), under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Entry is denied to those who otherwise pose threats to the welfare and security of the United States, who do not have adequate means of support while in the country, or who may be deemed undesirable for other reasons.

More interviews with prospective foreign arrivals are now being made. These interviews take place in the applicant's home country, prior to arrival, given by a US consular officer. Citizens of countries taking part in the visa waiver program will not be affected.

Since 2004, fingerprints and pictures taken of foreign citizens are reviewed and stored in a government database so that individuals' comings and goings can be monitored. The US employs Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS), a fast, electronic fingerprint ID system holding a database of 55 million fingerprint sets, available for cross-checking when travellers enter the country. Finger scans, photographs, or other biometric measures of identification may be required.

Under the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), nationals of 35 countries do not require visas to enter the United States for visits of up to 90 days, for either holiday or business. A visit to the Visas section of the US Department of State website (http://travel.state.gov/content/visas/en.html) gives you the list of those countries. All citizens entering from VWP countries must present a machine-readable passport. Citizens of eight VWP countries - Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, South Korea, and the Slovak Republic - must present an e-Passport.

Grounds for exclusion from the VWP include contagious disease and criminal activity. Fingerprinting is not required of people arriving in the United States under the visa waiver program. Travellers must, however, be in possession of a non-transferable onward or return ticket for transportation to a destination outside the United States.

Two major categories of visas are issued, immigrant and non-immigrant. Most business visitors to the United States require the latter. Such visas are issued directly by US consulates abroad; you may obtain the appropriate form from the Department of State website. Before you travel to the United States for employment purposes, you must obtain USCIS approval. You may also be required to file paperwork with the Department of Labor. Typically this is handled by the employer.

There are several subcategories of non-immigrant visas, depending upon the length of stay, multiple or single entries, and other factors. Consulates can advise you on the appropriate visa, which often can be processed and issued on the same day.

Over the years the American dream has been an alluring proposition for a number of investors where the prospects of year round sun, an outdoors lifestyle and the chance to be a part of the world's largest economy has been too tempting to resist.

While obtaining a green card is not without its challenges and often requires an investment of $500,000 or more, an alternative and more suitable option could be the E-2 Investor Visa. Within six to eight weeks the visa allows the holder to establish a business in the US and while the level of investment has no clear definition, experience shows the amount required would be at least $100,000.

An increasingly popular consideration for investors who don't want to build a new business from the ground up, is investing in a pre-existing franchise that gives you the necessary training, support and branding that can often take years to obtain.

By investing in a US franchise and taking an active role in the day-to-day management of the company, you, your spouse and any children under the age of 21 could find that the E-2 Visa an attractive option.

FATCA

The foreign account tax compliance act (FATCA) became law in March 2010. A key focus of this piece of legislation is reporting by US taxpayers of certain foreign financial accounts and offshore assets. It also covers reporting by financial institutions about financial accounts held by US taxpayers.

The objective of FATCA is to ensure the US government gets its tax dollar from assets US taxpayers have hidden or not reported outside of the US. British expats in the US may well not consider themselves a tax dodger as they believe they are paying the correct amount of tax in the US and UK. But they may have an issue if they have left behind bank accounts or investments. FATCA will look at the underlying structure of the accounts or investments and if they deem it non-compliant, there could be further taxes to pay.

An example of this is an offshore investment bond which would likely be deemed as a passive foreign investment company (PFIC) and would have its own tax consequences. For a good number of reasons British expats in the US may want to keep assets outside of the US denominated in sterling. There are investment options to cater for this scenario which are compliant with the rules of the US taxman, the IRS. They allow a British expats in the US to retain sterling investments outside of the US and become tax compliant. They also allow expats to manage currency risk by allowing a switch to US dollars should it be advantageous to do so (and back again if required).

Another area which will be affected by FATCA is the use of qualifying recognised overseas pension schemes (QROPS) by British expats in the US. The majority of QROPS are based in Malta, which has signed up to FATCA reporting. There is a widely-held belief that should a British expat transfer their UK pension to a QROPS while US resident, this will create a tax charge on the transfer as it will no longer be a qualifying UK pension scheme. Currently the IRS doesn't know when this happens and Britons just report income, which is taxed through self-assessment.

FATCA reporting will mean that the IRS will find out when they transferred to the QROPS and could quite easily issue a tax bill as this a chargeable event. There are compliant pension schemes available for Britons living in the US which allow them to make use of tried and tested double taxation agreements without using QROPS. These allow the expat to have a US dollar-denominated pension which stays in the UK - therefore remains a qualifying UK pension in the eyes of the IRS.

FATCA's powers are far reaching and the quantity of information it will uncover will be staggering. It will take the IRS a long time to sift through it all but at some point, if your US/UK financial planning isn't compliant, you may well get a very unwelcome letter from the taxman.

Restrictions On Highly-Skilled Entrants To The USA

The US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has announced multiple measures to deter and detect H-1B visa fraud and abuse.

The H-1B visa programme was designed to help US companies recruit highly-skilled foreign nationals when there is a shortage of qualified workers in the country. But the US government reckons the system is being abused to the detriment of American workers.

The USCIS will now take a more targeted approach when making site visits across the country to H-1B petitioners and the worksites of H-1B employees. USCIS will focus on:

- Cases where USCIS cannot validate the employer's basic business information through commercially available data
- H-1B-dependent employers (those who have a high ratio of H-1B workers as compared to US workers, as defined by statute
- Employers petitioning for H-1B workers who work off-site at another company or organisation's location.

Buying Property In The USA

The buying process in the USA follows a British model – more accurately a Scottish one – rather than a continental European model. This means it is cheaper than in most countries, typically adding less than 3% to the purchase price.

One big difference to other countries is the Multiple Listing Service (MLS), an online database where you can quickly see every property for sale in the area, from every agent, without needing to contact each individually, writes Christopher Nye. Since every country now has a dominant portal (Rightmove, Immoscout, Seloger etc), this is no longer such a rarity, but still very useful.

In the USA there are buyers' agents and sellers' agents. As a buyer you normally sign up to just one agent and it is they who will go to the sellers' agents to find you a property. They have access to every home on the MLS, so avoid going to a sellers' agent as it will be in their interests to show you only their own clients' property.

If you buy, the commission is paid from the sales price and divided between both agents. A realtor is not just any broker, it is the trademark of a licensed member of the National Association of Realtors, trained, qualified and continuously retrained.

The exact processes and costs vary between states. In some states a lawyer is essential while in others it isn't, for instance. As an overseas buyer it makes sense to have an independent lawyer working just for you.

It is also sensible to talk to a tax and inheritance specialist about your ownership structure before making any offers. It may seem odd to plan for selling the property when you haven't even bought it yet, but it could save you a lot of money if you plan ahead.

Americans are very fond of the open house approach, with all the viewers invited at once. If looking at a show home check if the furniture package you are buying is of the same quality as shown or will cost extra. If planning to rent out a property, for example near DisneyWorld, make sure the area is zoned to allow such rentals. Not everywhere is.

When you have chosen the property, you make an offer orally via your own realtor to the seller's agent or the seller personally. Via offer and counter-offer hopefully you reach agreement on the price and other conditions such as the date or the deal being contingent on getting a mortgage, for example. At this point, if not before, you will need a lawyer.

While it is still just a verbal offer, you can withdraw or the seller can accept a higher offer. However, within a day or two your agent will be sent details of the property, such as condominium agreements and finances.

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RISKS ON THE RISE

Medical issues, severe penalties for breaching local laws such as immigration and tax regulations and terrorism are the most common risks facing businesses who send workers overseas.

This is according to new research by global mobility firm Santa Fe Relocation. The findings from its 2017 Global Mobility Survey revealed that nearly a nearly a quarter of those managing overseas secondments or assignments have faced a 'critical incident' in the last year and nearly two-thirds in the last five.

Rather worryingly, more than one in ten global mobility and HR teams stated their business does not monitor or manage risk and host country environmental factors at all.

Despite the risks associated with working abroad, enthusiasm for international placements has not diminished. Santa Fe's findings show that nearly two-thirds of businesses surveyed regularly send employees on long- and short-term work placements, with five out of the top seven global locations seeing an increase in overseas workers. Figures by financial consultancy firm, Finaccord, suggest there are now 56.8 million expats working abroad, with nearly 75% of them being individual workers and corporate transferees. In the past five years there has been an annual growth rate of 2.4%.

While the responsibility for managing risk and country environmental factors typically falls to internal security or risk teams – or is outsourced to a designated external provider – global mobility and HR professionals are increasingly ensuring they have policies and programmes in place to manage their organisation's risk profile by ensuring staff are safe on secondment and the business is compliant.

Over two-thirds of global mobility professionals report they now have a policy in place better to mitigate risk, which has risen from 55% in 2016. With the need to comply with local laws and regulations, especially when it comes to immigration and tax, these measures are critical and must be in place ahead of the expatriation or business travel.

Prepared & Protected

As counter-terrorism police issue an advice video for travellers, The Health Insurance Group is asking if employers can do more for both expat staff and business travellers to help them feel better prepared and protected.

Recent high-profile terror attacks, extreme weather and natural disasters are understandably likely to make employees more concerned about their personal safety - a feeling which may be heightened when based overseas or travelling abroad. In a recent study by the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) 59% of managers said they were concerned about security and terrorism when their staff travel abroad.

Sarah Dennis, head of international for The Health Insurance Group said: "Situations can change rapidly and without warning due to a political situation or natural disaster, making previously safe areas dangerous. Employers need to be prepared, and having appropriate cover helps them to meet their duty of care wherever their staff are working."

Travelling and living abroad for business is increasingly common and employees are travelling to less stable regions. Half of the managers responding to the ABTA survey said that staff had experienced at least one issue in the last 12 months. Natural disasters and extreme weather were among the most common issues experienced.

Terrorist attacks and natural disasters can happen anywhere. A country may have political unrest, or a higher risk of natural disasters such as earthquakes or volcanic eruptions. Irrespective of the cause, situations can arise and escalate quickly with little or no warning. Employers have a responsibility, wherever they are sending staff, both to reassure and meet their legal duty of care.

It should be a priority for companies to have policies and processes in place to offer protection and manage any incident that may arise for overseas workers. The list of preparations should include staying up to date with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice, establishing evacuation policies and ensuring the relevant insurance cover is in place.

As companies grow and extend their operations around the globe they need to consider the provisions put in place both for staff who will be living and working abroad for extended periods and those travelling overseas for shorter trips. Making sure adequate protection is in place not only enables a company to fulfil its legal duty of care obligations, it is reassuring for staff to know they are protected.

Expats Demand More

Bupa Global, the international health insurer, has carried out extensive research among 150 human resources directors and 1,851 globally mobile employees. It found that employees are demanding more from their employers in terms of health and wellbeing benefits while working abroad, and their international private medical insurance (IPMI) in particular.

A third of HR directors expect their global workforce to increase in the next five years, and correspondingly more than half report a rising demand for international private medical insurance over the past five years.

The research also found that a quarter of staff working overseas expect more health and wellbeing benefits from their employer today than they did five years ago. International private medical insurance and flexible working hours were among the most desired benefits, with nearly three-quarters of employees expecting access to treatment in their host country. Two-thirds of employees who receive international private medical insurance from their employer say they wouldn't travel abroad without it.

When asked more specifically about looking after their health when abroad, 82% of senior executives and 90% of employees say they consider it the responsibility of their employer.

Sheldon Kenton, managing director of Bupa Global said: "Employees are becoming increasingly engaged with their own health and wellbeing, and are calling on their employers to take an active role in it too. We know that people now want and expect to receive treatment in their host country and have access to the same standard of medical care while abroad, rather than travelling home. With more employees likely to work abroad over the next five years, employers need to work with a global healthcare provider which can offer cover to complement and enhance any domestic plans, improving the health of their workforce."

The research also shows that it is even more crucial that adequate health cover is in place as people progress in their career, with mental health becoming an increasing workplace concern as people climb the career ladder. When asked what health and wellbeing issues employees are likely to face as they become more senior within an organisation, HR directors listed increased stress, depression and anxiety as the biggest concerns.


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MONEY QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

The panel of financial experts at Expat Network is happy to answer your expat money questions. Here are the latest it has tackled...

HOW DO I LAND A JOB IN THE **MIDDLE EAST**?

I am looking for a job in the Middle East, ideally the UAE, and wondered if you might have some tips about how to go about this? I have experience in the finance, medical and engineering sectors.

Rebecca Steele, from expat financial advisers AES International, based in Dubai, answered this.

"Having been a job seeker myself in the Middle East my best advice would be to research companies you are interested in and email the relevant person directly with a CV and cover letter. I joined the well-known job sites, like BAYT and Gulf Talent, but it takes a long time to hear back from them and in my opinion, they are very overcrowded. Contacting directly, I almost always got a response.

"Often CVs in the Middle East include a photograph and things which are not usually quoted in the UK, like marital status, age and dependants. You will notice age ranges stipulated on some job adverts!

"You should research salaries and know what you want to / can earn as you will likely be asked this. Salaries are quoted monthly, not annually like in the UK. For example, 12,000 dirhams would be a quoted salary – which means 12,000 dirhams per month (approximately £2,500).

"Once you have an interview or get to a job offer stage, you also need to negotiate. Many jobs in the UAE will come with a housing allowance which is often built into the salary. You will also get a visa and medical cover with any position, which is a legal requirement in the UAE. There is usually a probationary period of three months.

"There are two types of labour contract, limited and unlimited. Limited means you are fixed to work with that firm for say two years and will be charged if you leave before (the reverse of course meaning if they break the contract, they pay you). Unlimited means you are not bound to anything like this. You should also consider where the firm is based, since there are 'free zones' which are like their own legal entities and come with slightly different visas. AES for example has two offices in Dubai, one in DIFC which is a free zone and one outside."

• For more expat Q&As go to the Money section of www.expatnetwork.com

TAX ON RETURN TO THE UK?

We are in the process of considering a return to the UK. We left in April 2015 and we are resident in the Philippines. If we return we plan to sell our property in the Philippines to use as payment for a property in the UK. The question is, will the money to be transferred be subject to UK tax?

Jason Porter, a director of expat financial advisers Blevins Franks, answered this question.

"The date of UK residence ceasing could be important – before or after 5 April 2015 might be material. Unfortunately, around this time there have been changes in both the tax reliefs available on main homes, and the UK's tax residency rules.

"The transfer of money is not taxable in its own right. If you sell the property after you have resumed UK tax residence, then potentially, it will be exposed to UK tax, specifically UK capital gains tax (CGT). Even if you sell the Philippines property prior to resuming UK residence, it is still likely to be exposed to UK CGT (though exemptions could apply to eliminate any charge), as you will not have been non-UK resident for five complete tax years. If you had left before 5 April 2015, then you would need to remain non-UK resident until after 5 April 2020. If you left after 5 April 2015, then you would need to remain non-UK resident until after 5 April 2021.

"But, the UK has CGT exemptions for the main home, known as principal private residence (PPR) relief. From 6 April 2015, any residence owned by a UK or non-UK resident will only be capable of qualifying for PPR if it is located in a territory in which the individual is resident. In determining the residence status of an individual, new UK statutory residence test (SRT) rules will apply in the UK, which while helpful, are quite complicated. This sounds a lot worse than it actually is, because failing a test does not mean the whole gain becomes chargeable – it is only the proportion of gain relating to a non-qualifying period which is taxable.

"The final 18 months of your period of ownership always qualify for relief, regardless of how you use the property in that time, as long as the dwelling has been your only or main residence at some point.

"If the dwelling has not always been your only or main residence, or a period is not covered by an exemption, you'll need to split the gain. When calculating the proportion of the gain eligible for relief, you divide the period of ownership between qualifying and non-qualifying periods.

"In your particular case, I would suggest the period of occupation from April 2015, until you leave the property to return to the UK will be a qualifying period. After that, it will depend on how long it takes you to sell the property – if it takes less than 18 months then the whole period of ownership will be exempt. If it takes longer than 18 months from leaving the Philippines to selling it, then the period over and above the 18 months will be a taxable proportion of gain.

"Obviously, this all hangs on a gain actually being made – no gain, and there is no tax liability. You will need to exchange the values of the property into sterling values at both acquisition and sale (using the exchange rates then, which you can get from the internet), as this will then factor in exchange rate gains or losses from a UK perspective."

• Jason Porter is the co-author of the book, 'Retiring to Europe', and its website www.retiringtoeurope.com, where a free download of the book is available.

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