

Firstly, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this initiative – I congratulate you on it and hope that it leads to positive developments for Australia and her expatriot community.

I was born in Britain in 1967 but emigrated to Australia with my family at the age of 10 and acquired Australian citizenship at the age of 21. In 1995 I and my husband left Australia to seek work in Germany (he has dual German/Australian nationality). We were planning to stay away for approximately 2 years. We lived in Germany during 1995, England from 1996 – 2000 and Austria from 2000 – present. We will shortly be relocating to Germany. Our dual nationality has been a great boon in terms of ease of access to jobs throughout Europe. We have encountered no barriers to free movement or access to employment. I work in IT and my husband is a chemical engineer. Two years ago our daughter was born in Austria. She is not eligible for Austrian citizenship as she has no Austrian parent but inherits Australian, British and German citizenship from us. We both speak fluent German (something I have learnt only since leaving Australia) and are attempting to raise our daughter bilingually in German and English.

Before leaving Australia we were extremely naïve about our obligations to Australia in our absence. We have since declared ourselves non-residents for tax purposes. However we retain a non-resident investment portfolio in Australia due in part to the excellent returns available there.

During our time overseas we have never actively sought contact with other Australian ex-patriots. It has been important for us to get to know local people. As a result I cannot comment on many of the aspects of Australian ex-patriot „group life“ or Australian missions as this has not been part of our experience. However our approach has been truly rewarding for us and we now count many European folk among our friends – both English- and German-speaking.

At times our Australian nationality has caused us embarrassment among our European friends, this was particularly the case during the Nauru debacle when we received plenty of opinions about the racist nature of the Australian government. We also encounter many statements of concern about the plight of Aboriginals in Australia – another embarrassing topic to discuss, especially given our own lack of information/knowledge about the situation.

Our support of Australia from overseas has been in the following areas:

- continuing financial investment in Australia
- advice/maps/books given to people interested in or planning trips to Australia
- accommodation and hospitality for a steady stream of visitors from Australia who have stayed anywhere from 1 night to 3 months

I personally retain a great interest in Australian affairs and check „The Age“ website daily.

We feel we have integrated well into all the societies we have lived in Europe (last count 5 as we moved within the UK and Austria). We have attempted to adopt many of the cultural norms of the places we have lived, and have always found ourselves welcome and treated well. A key factor is of course being able to speak the language. Our qualifications and professional memberships were recognised within the UK but we have not applied to have them officially recognised within Austria or Germany (a necessary step if one wishes to use a title here such as Dipl-Ing etc). Until now this has not caused problems with finding or keeping employment in the German-speaking world as unofficial recognition by individuals and companies certainly exists.

One area of living in Austria that has impressed me greatly has been the financial support for parents. This is something I consider lacking in Australia at the moment, despite the progress made recently – which places too much burden on the private sector as far as I can tell. Since the birth of my child nearly two years ago I have received a tax-free monthly payment of approximately AUD700 from the Austrian Government for staying at home to look after her. This is paid until she is 2.5 and is in addition to the standard family allowance of approximately AUD250 per month per child. Statutory maternity leave is 2 years. For 8 weeks before and after the birth of a child, all mothers are in a period of „mother protection“ during which they are legally not allowed to work. During this period, their salary is paid in full by the Austrian government. In the case of multiple births or caesarean sections the post-birth „mother protection“ period is 12 weeks. The level of financial support for parents in Austria is therefore outstanding and is contributing to stabilising the birthrate decline. This is a big issue for Australia as well, especially given the current tendency to cut down immigration as a source of population growth. It disappoints me that there

seems to be little more than lip-service at the moment to the concept of financial support for giving birth to the tax payers of the future.

Although I will never be an Austrian or German I feel able to live here on a permanent basis. The rich culture here fascinates me and enlivens the passing of time, in a way it never could in Australia. I miss my family terribly, especially with my daughter now here, but we are fortunate enough to see each other regularly. As both my parents and parents-in-law emigrated to Australia, our extended family is scattered across the world – far from ideal.

I personally return to Melbourne regularly (bi-annually) on holiday and am always amazed by the customer service, variety and accessibility of goods and services and quality of development in tourism and cultural facilities. What disappoints me are:

- the tolls on access roads within the city
- the excessive bank fees
- the appalling standard of driving on Melbourne's roads
- the ongoing degradation of public transport, forcing more cars onto the roads which are then used as cash cows
- the insidious Americanisation of Australia – primarily in the areas of culture and economic and military policy. I read a submission from America which painted Australia as rampantly socialist. Having lived in a truly socialist country – Austria – it is my belief that Australia's increasingly right-wing policies particularly in health, education, immigration and social security are a worrying development. This is a strong contributing factor in our reluctance to return to Australia. We enjoy living in a country with a strong sense of egalitarianism among its citizens. This once-essential aspect of Australian life is, in my opinion, slowly being eroded.
- the inconsistent attitude to stamping my passport when entering/leaving Australia which I am expecting to cause me problems if and when I eventually return to Australia. Australia collects vast amounts of information on the comings and goings of its citizens – ***I strongly believe that this historical information should be available on demand to citizens attempting to reestablish their lives in Australia as it is the sole source of proof of their period(s) of absence.*** At my last pass through Tullamarine I was informed that it is classified information and hence not available.

At this stage my most compelling reason for returning to Australia would be to return to study. Although as an EU-citizen I am entitled to study in Austria or Germany without restraint, there are issues in terms of recognition of my existing Australian qualifications. These need to be formally approved before I can embark on a course of study. Study is much cheaper here however – Austria currently charges approximately AUD600 per semester regardless of the course. I am currently considering returning to Australia to study rather than pursuing options in Europe. The main reason for this is my perception that courses taught in Australia are run much more efficiently than in Europe where it can take many years to obtain a qualification.

In my research into the aspects of returning to Australia I have been disappointed at the lack of good information available on the internet for people like us contemplating a return to Australia. One of my concerns at the moment is the transfer of a private pension from the UK to an Australian superannuation fund. I am unsure of how to proceed and find it difficult to obtain information. It would be useful if one could take up contact ***prior to return*** with someone who could advise on some important aspects, e.g. re-registering for Medicare etc.

At some point in the last nine years I realised that I no longer have a place I can call home. I no longer regard myself as a citizen of anywhere in particular – just of the world. It's always good to meet other people like us who understand this rootlessness because it is quite lonely at times. This is one of the disadvantages of dual nationality and free movement overseas. Another is having too much choice. This may sound strange but we are in a situation where due to our nationalities and professions we could live and work or study in many places throughout the world. When making some of life's hard decisions, sometimes it is easier to have less choices.