Expat Life

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Mind your manners in expat bars

Some foreigners create a less than favourable impression in China, says **Navjot Singh**

Foreign expats in China are, on the whole, given quite a lot of respect and status by the locals – almost a VIP treatment. But it would be difficult for anyone to assess how foreigners are actually seen by the Chinese. It's a difficult concept to master, one which cannot be answered by any expat.

Even if your heritage is Chinese, you would be somewhat of a misfit in Chinese society because you have lived in Europe, America or any other non-Chinese environment; just as I would be a misfit in Indian society as I have had a very British upbringing.

One thing that does frustrate the locals is the sort of arrogant colonial behaviour of some foreign expats from Europe. This is most apparent when you enter expat bars or an expat enclave in China.

I have my fair share of anecdotes of being on the receiving end of discrimination from white expats (irrespective of their country of origin) simply because they see me as Indian.

One example is Hong Kong, the former British colony on the border with mainland China, where Africans, mainland Chinese and South Asians are still discriminated against for various reasons; and where it would prove tricky to get a white collar job if you are not a native Hong Kong Chinese or white.

Shekou is a classic example of an expat ghetto in China. Located in the south-west of Shenzhen (the Chinese city bordering Hong Kong), the city is home to around 8,000 expatriates from all around the world. Most are professionals working in the oil, gas or manufacturing industries. Some are English teachers, while others work on oil rigs offshore in the South China Sea.

Earlier this year, I went into a British expat bar in Shekou. Normally after work, I would go straight back to my home. But it was Friday, and I happened to be in this part of town. I decided to pop in for a quick pint.

As soon as I put my foot inside the building, I noticed that the atmosphere was no different to what I would encounter in, say, Leeds, Manchester or Newcastle. There was a large Union Jack plastered against the wall with stickers of all the major football clubs and pre-recorded footage of a Premier League football match playing on the television. Even the bar tender (who somewhat resembled the Chinese basketball star, Yao Ming), was wearing a Manchester United shirt. It really had that strong feeling of, yes, I am in England.

Just as I was about to order my drink, one of the three rather intoxicated gentleman sitting next to me asked in a strong Yorkshire accent "Where are you from then, mate?"

"London," I replied, to which he reeled off a long list of reasons for not returning back to the UK. I was surprised that he even took time to talk to me, considering his xenophobic views.

To add to the shock, halfway through the conversation, he turned around to the Chinese bar tender and ordered another drink, using abusive language.

Sadly, the bar tender gladly gave the gentleman his drink with a smile, without knowing what he had just been called by his discourteous punter.

What really confused me was that on one side you had these expats openly conversing in abusive language about Asians (Chinese, Indians etc) and Africans, yet at the same time they had their arms around young Chinese girls (who did not speak much English).

I have come across this scenario quite a number of times during my stay in China. It is more apparent when you are living and working in China, and not when you are a tourist (as a tourist you don't get to experience everyday life). The other

Language is often the cause of conflict between expats and locals

place in China famous for such loud expat bars is Shanghai, especially around the exclusive Hua Hai Lu part of the metropolis – Shanghai's equivalent to London's west end.

People forget that when we are outside of our own country, we automatically become the "flag" carriers, and everything we say or do can make others think of questions such as: "Is this how British people behave?"

This becomes all the more apparent in parts of the world where the locals may not have come across many people, even from outside of their villages.

From mine and some other expats' experience, I believe the common thread, so far as western European people are concerned, is ignorance of the local language. It's the inability to communicate that facilitates the rude behaviour.

As one local Shanghai native pointed out to me one day: "Generally, when foreign people go to Europe, they are not treated like VIPs. However when foreigners come to China, they are treated with respect and a 'red carpet' treatment wherever they go."

It goes without saying that living and working in an environment that is completely different to the one which you are accustomed can make you go completely mad at one stage or another.

But this does not justify expats abusing the local culture or taking advantage of the of naïve locals, who are not familiar with our culture.

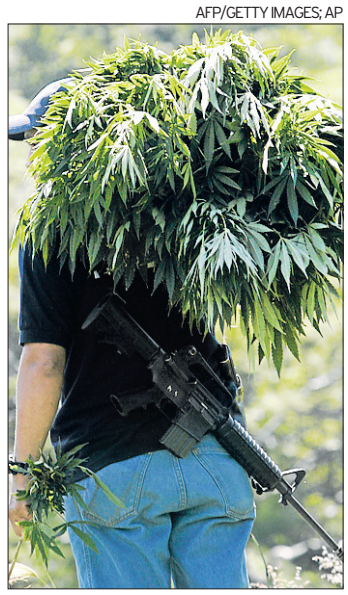
Expats should adapt themselves to the local environment, and not vice versa.

Navjot Singh is the author of Newcomer's Handbook Country Guide, China: Including Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenzhen *(Firstbooks, USA), and* China: Business Travellers Handbook *(Stacey International, UK)*

Narco-state that's 'safer' than London

The pros far outweigh the downside of life in Mexico for **Clive Warner**

AFP/GETTY IMAGES; AP



The tourist brochure beaches of Cancun (left) contrast with the other side of Mexico (above) as police confiscate marijuana in a country with a reputation as a failed 'narco-state'

It's Spanish, but it's not Spain. How does life in Mexico compare?

It's Thursday, which means I'm giving a class on passing the SAT to two students. I'm giving it at the house of one of them and it is halfway up the mountain in a fairly exclusive section of Del Valle, the number one *colonia* (neighbourhood) here in Monterrey, Mexico.

When I arrived for the first class, I noticed a man outside nextdoor leaning on a pickup truck. The heavy set guy looked an unlikely character for the social class of the area, so I thought "driver". But then he took out a notebook and wrote something in it. Hmmn.

By the third class, I was on pretty good terms with the students and one of them, who lived there, said: "I don't like the people living next door very much."

I said: "There's that weird guy outside all the time. Every time I arrive, he notes it in his little book."

"Yeah. They might be narcos," the student said.

When you listen to the news media, you often hear phrases like "narco state", and "failing". There are also reports of the 8,000 drug slayings and dissolvings (in acid), decapitations and kidnappings.

We don't like it, but we regard it as a self-cleaning oven – except in one respect. Many police have been slaughtered by the syndicates, so it is not uncommon to come across *retens* while driving. These are chicanes manned by soldiers. There's usually an armoured car nearby with a mounted and manned medium to heavy machine gun. This expat, though, feels infinitely safer in Mexico than in London, or Manchester, or Liverpool, or many other major British cities. One thing I don't miss is the British alcohol culture. In Monterrey, it is rare to see a drunk on the streets, and if a mess is made of the sidewalks in the nightclub district – the "Barrio Antiguo" – the newspaper, *El Norte*, is likely to get on the case fast.

Not that Mexicans don't like a drink. They invented mezcal and tequila, after all, and in this city we have Cervecería Cuauhtémoc-Moctezuma, responsible for Sol, Tecate, Carta Blanca, Dos Equis, and the 5.5 per cent ale, Bohemia. My day job is teaching at (fee-paying) secondary school level. I mainly teach physics and chemistry, but I've also taught modern history, computer studies, and English literature.

I have a very free hand compared with teachers in Britain. I decide my own curriculum content to a large degree, and I'm also responsible for creating my own exams. I don't think I would be able to stand the British winter if I returned. Monterrey can get really hot – 45C at times. Winter can be as low as 10C but it's a dry cold, not that skeletal dampness that sinks into you in a British winter. When I retire, I'll move to a quieter part of the country, one with an ideal climate near the Pacific shoreline.

Living costs are still low enough that one can just about get by on a British pension, provided the house is paid for. With no need for heating or cooling, an eco house design becomes possible, using the abundant sunshine and solar panels, backed up by a small biodiesel generator. Put that together with a sizeable kitchen garden and locally caught fish, and you have a plan for living a green and low-cost lifestyle.

Somewhere near Puerto Vallarta, perhaps; somewhere like the place where I am typing this report: the penthouse floor of a holiday home, one block from the beach, one block from the Buddha bar, with the sound of the waves rolling in.

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