Expat Partners: Our Stories

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Bente
Foreword

First of all, a big thank you to all the spouses and partners we have been in touch with since the idea of putting this publication together took shape. Some very personal stories may still be untold; however, the essence of what it is like to move to Denmark as an international and start life as a partner in the greater Aarhus area is evident in the stories you are about to read.

Expatriate Partners: Our Stories is a collection of stories written by real people living in our area. At International Community we feel the need to tell these stories to all who care to read them – to Danes as well as internationals. You may discover that the reality of life in the area is different from what you expected or assumed. We have tried to gather the good, the bad and the funny in these accounts – the frustrations that most partners have experienced, and the challenges not only of learning a new and difficult language, but also of joining such a tight-knit society as Denmark. We hope to provide stories in which newcomers can learn from the experience of others, and we hope to show some ways to navigate the stages that others have been through before.

We also hope to be able to gauge partner expectations of what it is like to live and work in the Aarhus area.

Who are these spouses, these expat partners? Above all they are individuals, who have been adventurous enough to create a new life in (in many cases) a very foreign land. They are brave, highly educated, have a global mindset and, most important of all, they were willing to leave friends and family behind in order to be here.

Bente Cordes
Spouse Community Organiser
December 2011
How to survive culture shock
by Dorte Kongerslev

A psychologist’s eye view of why it can be tough to adjust to living as an expat partner – and how to get the most out of it.

Being an expat partner, especially in the first year, can be a difficult and draining experience. It can feel a world away from what you imagined when you agreed to relocate together. If you have felt under the weather, drained of energy, if you felt irritable or needed to curl up and isolate yourself at home, if you felt lonely and stuck in a negative cycle of thoughts, no matter what you tried – then it probably felt as if you were doing something wrong. Well – welcome to the club! You are not alone in experiencing this. Much of what you are feeling is an inherent part of adjusting to a new life in a new country. You are not going crazy, you are not a bad person, you are not a weak person. You are experiencing what psychologists call ‘massive simultaneous change’.

Culture shock

The term ‘culture shock’ is traditionally used to describe how people react when they move to a new country and a new cultural context. The culture shock curve shows four phases. **Stage one** is elation, generally known as the honeymoon phase. You are positive about the new country and your new life. You made your choice, and you are determined to make it work. Finding your way in the new country is like being on vacation: the strangeness that you experience is exotic and exciting.

**Stage two** is culture shock. After a little time, reality hits. This is no holiday; you have to make a life in this country. The strangeness that is so hard to make sense of is frustrating and uncomfortable, and it feels as if the person that you are is constantly under attack. Small everyday things that were easy at home suddenly seem almost insurmountable. Just going shopping can be such a challenge that you feel like giving up before you have begun. This is a heavy drain on your personal resources. You may be irritable and you may even clash with your spouse or children. You may withdraw from social events and not want to see anyone; many want to hide away at this stage. This is a painful place to be, because you are no longer sure of who you are, and because it is taboo to be lonely. You may find yourself asking, ‘Who am I?’
One of the Sculpture by the Sea exhibits along the beaches of Aarhus.

Photo: Anders Hede
The main reason we came here was for my husband's job. I started to be proactive about looking for work as soon as we arrived.

I looked for groups I could join, and people who could give me guidance and help with the culture and lifestyle and with the job market. That's how I found International Community. Their meetings, workshops and conferences have been really helpful – without forgetting to mention the one-to-one personal contact and help they have given me, and the tips and information in the weekly newsletter.

Through the social meetings I met some beautiful people who I still hang out with, and they have become very good friends in Aarhus. So at the beginning everything was new and nice and cosy. After the first weekend, we realised that going out for a casual dinner with drinks was definitely not a cheap option. But once we made friends and started to invite each other over, it was fine.

Setting up on my own

The International Community workshops helped me with my CV and guided me through the first phase of my job search. But even though I looked intensively for six months in the marketing field and in business development strategy, I couldn't find work. Then I decided to set up my own business and work as a consultant to help companies explore the possibility of exporting

“I decided to set up my own business”
to Mexico – which has a market of more than five million people who can afford to buy luxury and design products. I gave some presentations to companies about the Mexican market and how to do business there. But most of the small and medium-sized companies I found were producing hi-tech agricultural and medical machinery, so the sectors didn’t match up, and they didn’t seem very interested in exploring a developing-country market anyway. So that didn’t produce concrete results.

I’m feeling more stable in Aarhus now, because I have created a network. I still have my ups and downs though, especially since I still miss doing something in my profession which can challenge me intellectually. And of course, sometimes the weather can be a big influence!

At the moment, based on the fact that organic and natural are such key themes in the Danish consumer market, I’m developing and manufacturing a new natural beauty product based on organic ingredients grown only in Mexico. I’ll be launching and promoting this product on the Danish market early in December.
Late September 2010, and my partner Bela had spotted a job advert in a trade magazine which seemed to describe her skills exactly. Two weeks later we were heading to Aarhus for a long weekend which included a job interview.

First stop was tourist information, which has very helpful staff. With our 48-hour tourist passes, we set off to see if Aarhus was a city we could live in. The job was offered, and as most of my work is on a computer, I had no real reason to object to moving. Skype and email are the same wherever you are, and the prospect of learning a new language and meeting a whole new set of people was quite appealing.

It was getting dark and there were no light fittings! After the extreme challenge of finding somewhere to live, we travelled by car and ferry, with just space for such bare necessities as folding lawn-chairs, Ikea plates and cups, and air mattresses. We believed we had to live with just what we could fit in the car for between seven and ten days, while our carefully packed worldly belongings were shipped from the UK. In fact, we lived with these basics for over a month, due to hiring the worst moving company in the world. But that's another story.

We arrived in Aarhus on the afternoon of 24 January. We were impressed by our new home. It was clean, roomy, and very Scandinavian. Slightly too Scandinavian – it was only then we discovered it was getting dark and there were no light fittings! This is quite the surprise if you come from the UK. So back into the car. We had to guess which shops sold things like lights, but our first guess was not the shop for us: we were offered coffee, and discovered that their cheapest floor lamp was about DKr12,000! Next was a shop called Harald Nyborg, at the other end of the spectrum. Just the place to buy a cheap emergency light.

In the two weeks before Bela started work, we started to settle in. Socially, a neighbour popped round to see if we were okay, and even brought us a small cake. On our first full day, we registered with the post office, which is required if you wish to get any mail. We were also glad for the tip about registering for the sticker that saves you receiving the traditionally huge amount of junk mail every day. And of course, we registered with the various required authorities. Just before we arrived, a new ‘one stop shop’ had opened, bringing representatives of the vital offices together to make this process easier. Our registration for residence, tax and for a health card was completed in about an hour: very impressive. Even so the first month, until you get your CPR card, is challenging. So much in Denmark depends on it – getting a mobile phone contract, a bank account, even my fishing licence.

The last desk at the ‘one stop shop’ was the International Community. We have been to many of their events and receive their updates. We arrived in Aarhus on the afternoon of 24 January. We were impressed by our new home. It was clean, roomy, and very Scandinavian. Slightly too Scandinavian – it was only then we discovered it was getting dark and there were no light fittings! This is quite the surprise if you come from the UK. So back into the car. We had to guess which shops sold things like lights, but our first guess was not the shop for us: we were offered coffee, and discovered that their cheapest floor lamp was about DKr12,000! Next was a shop called Harald Nyborg, at the other end of the spectrum. Just the place to buy a cheap emergency light.

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Just keep asking around.

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newsletter every week, the best source of information on what’s happening in Aarhus. Through one of the International Community events, we ended up joining the Aarhus canoe and kayak club. Clubs are very popular with Danes, and you will find clubs of all types in every city – clubs for sports, arts, crafts and, in Aarhus, even a place called Huset, where you can learn just about any craft you can think of. Some clubs have a web presence, though most sites are only in Danish, and word of mouth is still probably the most dominant form of advertising. This makes it a little difficult to find out about them initially, but just keep asking around. For example, Bela and I both swam for a club in Oxford, and wanted to carry on training in Denmark. So we went to the Svømmestadion in F. Vestergaards Gade and chatted with the AGf Masters coach, and joined up straight away. We highly recommend joining clubs as a really good route to integrate, both in terms of meeting new friends and practising your language skills. You will be expected to participate fully in any clubs you join. This means helping out, as well as just taking part in organised activities.

The language challenge deserves a mention. The Danes speak fantastic English, and this certainly helps at the beginning. However, to fully integrate and participate in society, you need to be able to understand and speak Danish. We are both taking advantage of the excellent language training made available to new immigrants. I am attending Lærdansk language school in Aarhus, while Bela has recently started with an online system, NetDansk. We are both eligible for up to three years of language lessons, free of charge. With these resources, I am already making great strides in communicating in Danish, and also giving cause for great hilarity with my mistakes.

I didn’t know what to expect when we moved here, but based on my experiences, my advice to others in my position would be to make the effort to join in. If you do, you will not regret it. Nine months in, and we are well on the way to learning a new language, we have many new friends, we have shared in many Danish traditions like Danish Højskole, attending a fortieth birthday party (a big bash!) and a Danish wedding, and in the run-up to Christmas, we are looking forward to a number of julefrokosts (Christmas parties, but more so). It’s hard to believe that only nine months ago we were sitting in an empty house, with no lights.
Autumn in the Marselis Woods south of Aarhus
Talking about the expat wife in Denmark is like talking about the Invisible Woman. She’s there, but you do not see her – most of the time. Being such an invisible woman, I would like to tell you a bit more about her by telling you about me and my experiences.

But before we go into that, let me say that I realise that there are also expat husbands who accompany their wives (or husbands), and although not everything is the same for both groups, many things are, so do not stop reading if your gender does not fit the title...

I am a Dutch woman of 49, who came to Denmark in August 2010 with her husband, who started a job at Aarhus University. We arrived on a warm Sunday evening with cats, clothes, computers, kitchenware in the boot and a bike strapped to the car. The next day, my husband was off to his job on his bike, I waved him goodbye from the window and when he cycled around the corner, I turned my gaze back into the dining-room of our rental bungalow and started playing house.

In the beginning it felt like a prolonged vacation
That is how it felt in the beginning. You could say that it felt like a prolonged vacation, and very often the people back in the country you left look at you that way too. For me, arriving in the summer, it was a wonderful time. I made lots of discoveries cycling round and getting acquainted with the opportunities the university and International Community provided for making spouses feel welcomed and empowered. I enthusiastically threw myself into importing the car, getting our CPR numbers, finding a new place to live. I joined a choir and started frequenting Aarhus Hackspace, a place where people interested in electronics and the World Wide Web meet. I got to know a lot of people, made friends with some of them, I started going to language school and in two months’ time I felt I had found a routine, a beginning of a Danish life.

It is a lot of work
Then why was it that I felt so incredibly tired? Only later I found out that it is normal to experience feelings of exhaustion after you have moved to another country. And if you stop and think about it, it is obvious why this is so: it is a lot of work. Everything is new, from the way electricity sockets work to the way meat is cut, and very few things are self-evident. If this is so for a woman who comes from one of the countries that is supposed to be very much like Denmark, imagine what it would be like for someone coming from China, Mexico or Botswana. And then there is of course the language, which complicates things even more.
A woman who does not have a job

That is when the holiday ended, and real life set in. Moving involves lots of practicalities, and moving to another country even more so. I discovered that I had turned into a housekeeper/butler, and although I thoroughly enjoy that role, I also felt a bit uncomfortable. Because in Denmark, a woman who does not have a job is, well, an anomaly, to put it mildly. All Danish women have jobs – or so it seems. Women who do not have a job are strange, and you are made to feel that you are a parasite. Notwithstanding the fact that you are doing very useful work, it is not valued as such. It is invisible work, invisible because it is not considered work. But for expats, lots of things that for native Danes are perfectly normal chores are an adventure at the least, and a problem in a lot of cases. This invisibility makes you feel less of a person, too. That is not an easy starting-point for finding your place in society. Also, you are mourning your former life. Many expat partners held jobs that they had to give up in order to come to Denmark, they had friends and networks that made it easy to find advice on insurance matters, or which doctor to choose. These are gone now, and there are times when you miss them dreadfully.

So there you are, in a strange country, having to explain yourself and your situation, as if you have no right to be there. And all that in Danish or English – let’s not forget that many expat wives do not have English as their mother tongue, so they have to grapple with two language problems here. No wonder lots of expat wives take the whole expat experience very personally. You are tired, without resources of your own, you are supposed to have a job but you cannot find one. The trouble is: it is not so easy to find a job in Denmark. In many jobs, a thorough knowledge of Danish is a vital requirement, and most of the expat spouses have not studied Danish in advance in order to hit the ground running when they land here. This is another invisible obstacle.

For you, things are entirely different

You take it very personally for another reason, because the expat experience influences your relationship with your partner, too. Your husband or wife came here with the help of her or his employer, and often they are pampered to a certain degree – at least in the beginning. But for you, things are entirely different. The Danish labour market does not seem to need your expertise, and that is not only bad for your sense of self-worth, it also means that you and your partner are experiencing different sides of Denmark. And that can make communication difficult. You and your partner are running on different timetables when it comes to appreciating and integrating into Denmark, and sometimes you feel estranged from the partner for whose sake you made this move. Again, this is a normal aspect of settling in, but it can be frightening when you feel this. It can be frightening when you discover that you move differently, act differently since you have come to Denmark, and that this different behaviour has seeped into your being in such a way that it also influences the small, daily gestures and touches that make up the intimacy of married life, too.

In a way, you have become invisible to yourself. In fact, you do not exist – yet. You have to construct a new personality, a Danish one, on top of who you already are. And all that by means of a language you do not fully master. So is it strange that you feel powerless, and you feel rage surging up in you every now and then? No it isn’t. Your Danish personality is invisible as such, and under construction, and that is hard work, too; you’re growing up in public.

So is the expat wife’s story a tale full of woes? To me it isn’t. I have embraced my Danish destiny and I feel as if I have been given the opportunity to reinvent myself as if I were eighteen again, but with the knowledge I have acquired up until now. And I like that. I am sure there will be disappointments ahead in my Danish life, but there were always going to be...
“We have grown as individuals and as a family”

When Matthew asked me if I would be interested in living in Denmark for a few years, we had just had our second child and I was a little nervous about it. When we packed up our things and moved to Silkeborg, near Aarhus, we had to get used to a whole new system – not to mention grocery shopping in a foreign country. I don’t know how many times I took yogurt instead of milk off the shelf. It made for interesting cereal in the morning!

Once we were settled into the house, we had to deal with obtaining a Danish driving licence. With an American driving licence you have two weeks to get to the municipality to hand it over and receive your driving permit. Then the fun begins. Nine months of going to driving school every Friday night, then the written exam, and then the practical test. This was a long and expensive process for both my husband and me.

When we arrived in winter when it was cold and rainy, I needed to get out and meet people and start to make a new routine for myself and for the family. Matthew’s colleagues were very accommodating and invited our family over for dinner, Christmas and coffee. I joined playgroups for the kids, and met some of my

BACKGROUND: AGE 32 FROM NEW YORK, US MOVED TO DENMARK NOVEMBER 2009
PROFESSIONAL PROFILE: EDUCATOR CONSULTANT IN FAMILY COMPANY
FAMILY STATUS: MARRIED TO MATTHEW · TWO CHILDREN, 6-YEAR-OLD CONNOR AND 3-YEAR-OLD DIONIS

“WE HAVE GROWN AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS A FAMILY”

Into the Danish system
Matthew and I decided that we wanted the children to get the most out of our time in Denmark, so we enrolled them in the Danish system. Our son went to a naturbørnehave and our little girl, who was only one, went to a dagplejer or childcare mom.

That was the best decision we made. Our son’s teacher connected him up with some new friends and their families and was incredibly supportive. Within weeks he could follow what was going on; within months he was fluent. Our daughter became close friends with another child in the dagplejer’s care and is now completely bilingual. Our son is now in Balle Skole, and our daughter has moved up to the naturbørnehave.

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Language questions
Matthew and I had Danish lessons at home for the first year to help us understand the basics, but as life got busier they fell by the wayside. Matthew adds at this point: Not speaking the language always presents some challenges but it doesn’t create barriers. The biggest disappointment of not speaking Danish has been when my son and daughter have friends over to the house. I’ve always enjoyed playing games with our kids and their friends, telling silly stories, and going on adventures with them, but it’s a little more difficult when the other children don’t understand your language. In these situations I rely heavily on my son to translate so that we can have as much fun with their friends in Denmark as we do with their friends in the States. I would say the most difficult situation was one night when one of the boys from my son’s school came over to spend the night. Late in the evening he woke up and I understood enough of what he was saying to know that he was scared of noises outside. Unfortunately, with our son fast asleep, there was nothing we could do to console his friend and we had to call his father for help.

Back to Megan: At the weekends, we explored Denmark, and beyond. One of our goals in this period was to see something new every weekend. Living in Europe has given us an amazing opportunity to travel. We have visited the beaches of Portugal, the ski slopes of Switzerland, German castles, Dutch flower beds, the rocky coastline of Norway and the beautiful scenery of Sweden, to name just some of the places we explored.

As our experience of living in Denmark comes to an end this spring, I reflect back on an amazing experience all four of us have gone through. We have grown as individuals and as a family. The opportunities we were able to provide for our children were rare and exotic. I am very glad that we took this opportunity, and I will cherish the memories that have formed through living in Denmark.
Ice skating in front of Aarhus Theatre in the city centre

Photo: Anders Hede
“It is not necessary to choose job or children – it is possible to have both”

Our story starts back in 1996. We were both in England following academic careers, and we had both been offered attractive new jobs. The only difficulty was that they were on two different continents.

Young and foolish, we briefly considered a long-distance relationship commuting between New Zealand and Africa, but in the end we opted to go to New Zealand.

I went first, and Iain followed six months later on what was to be his first stint as an ‘expat partner’. Once in New Zealand I made a couple of contacts on Iain’s behalf which he followed up, landing a sabbatical position which went on to be a permanent move from academia.

Although we didn’t know it at the time, we had started a pattern that has now seen us through several moves, including the transfer to Denmark. Our next move was to Australia. This time I was the expat partner, a position which led to a whole new career. As with the first move, my job was found through Iain’s contacts.

After we had children, I wanted to return to the Northern hemisphere. Christmas in the wintertime, summer holidays in July and August – it is a typical desire for many Europeans in Australia. We returned to England. I had a good job, the children were in a good school and had many friends. However, for Iain the second stint as expat partner, if you can be that in your own country, was no fun.

We agreed that he should start to look for a new job in Europe: I would be in the north, Iain would be outside the UK. I also put in the request that his new job be somewhere I would like to live.
We have not regretted it once. Iain moved to Aarhus. We had one
crazy week together, shortly after Iain arrived, to find a home
and a school; then the children and I arrived permanently after
three months. This time I had no intention of looking for a job:
this was my chance to have a year or two just being mum to the
children, drinking coffee and breathing a little again. We put the
children into a Danish private school which we found, as usual,
through contacts and people willing to help. They have settled
well. It is their fifth school in as many years, so we guess they
have learned to fit in and adapt.

I was supposed to be having time out for the children
I also have a job. Each day we cycled past the Teknologisk Insti-
tut and wondered what was done there – education or research.
Eventually, to solve the mystery we looked it up on the web and
just happened to look when they were advertising a position for
someone of my background. We hesitated a little: I was supposed
to be having time out for the children. However, we had been
advised to put them in SFO to help their Danish (it worked) and
most days I was ‘there too soon’ to fetch them, or so they said.
So I decided perhaps it was time to stop my long holiday and
work again.

It has worked well, and the Danish work–life balance is so much
better than in either the UK or Australia. It is not necessary to
choose between job and children: it is possible to have both. So
here we are, making use of this great city: the children sail in the
harbour and ride in the woodlands, while mum and dad drink cof-
fee somewhere in between, and enjoy the snowy Christmases.
BACKGROUND: AGE 42 FROM VANCOUVER, CANADA
MOVED TO DENMARK JULY 2010

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE: DESIGN CONSULTANT

FAMILY STATUS: MARRIED TO IAN - TWO CHILDREN, 8-YEAR-OLD ANNIIKA AND 6-YEAR-OLD HAYDEN

“It was through this generosity that friendships were born”

We first visited Aarhus in March 2010 for a three-day whirlwind tour of houses, schools and grocery stores. What I remember most about that initial experience was our relocation consultant assuring us that it didn’t snow in Denmark. Despite the snow and record freezing weather, we decided to relocate our family to the Aarhus area for an expected period of eighteen months.

We arrived in Aarhus in mid-July, to a wonderful but completely empty house in Højbjerg, a desirable suburb in southern Aarhus. Our shipping container from Canada was delayed, and our first introduction to Danish society was our generous neighbours coming by with inflatable beds, blankets, lamps, and baskets filled with milk and fruit, not to mention the home-baked Danish bread we have grown to love. It was through this generosity that friendships were born. We discovered quickly that July was not the ideal time to move in, as there had been a mass exodus from the neighbourhood. We had not appreciated that everyone travels in this month because the summer holiday is short. Højbjerg was a ghost town.

A crash course
My husband was needed at work shortly after our arrival, and this was a very uncertain time for the kids and me. It was still summer, our neighbourhood was empty, we had no car and knew almost nothing about the city, so we would take the bus into the centre of town to look around. Whenever I heard someone speaking English, I would interrupt them immediately to ask questions. Thank goodness, everyone was eager to help.

It was the regular frustration of translating Danish mail that made us rely on our neighbours and forge deeper friendships. Shopping was an ordeal at first, since some of our favourite foods
Whenever I heard someone speaking English, I would interrupt them immediately to ask questions. Thank goodness, everyone was eager to help.

Our kids have flourished in so many ways
As August approached and school started, the kids eagerly anticipated meeting new friends. Most kids in our neighbourhood spoke only Danish, and playdates were difficult to arrange. At the international school, our kids have flourished and grown in so many ways. They have matured and faced up to the challenge of meeting new friends, facing different personalities and, of course, very different cultures. It is this exposure to a cultural mosaic that has been an added bonus to their schoolwork. How much better and more tolerant lives they will lead, knowing people from so many different countries! The children have joined several clubs and have not been intimidated by language barriers. They have improved their knowledge of Danish.

I never felt there was a language barrier
Once the children were at school, I found I had a lot of free time on my hands. In the beginning I was worried I would get lonely, but through the graciousness of the experienced moms at the school, great friendships were formed over coffee mornings and school functions. I now find that sometimes I have too much on the go, and my social life is fulfilled. Recognising that Danes are extremely fit, I decided to challenge myself and began running through the gorgeous forests of Højbjerg with one of my neighbours. I have taken classes at the local gym as well as art classes, and have never felt that there was a language barrier, since most Danes speak English. I think it is important to extend yourself outside your comfort zone and try new things, or life could get awfully lonely.

We have decided to extend our expat contract to two years, something I would never have dreamed of doing in the beginning. We have faced our challenges together as a family, and with the support of new friends and colleagues we have overcome them all. Living in Denmark has been a great experience for the whole family.
Spring blossom in Aarhus neighbourhood

Photo: Anders Hede
I met my girlfriend, Line, who is Danish, in Canada in 2009. I was there for an Internship, she was an exchange student in psychology. We both went home to our own countries afterwards, but when I graduated six months later I moved to Aarhus to live with Line.

It was risky to move right after graduating with only my internship experience, but I didn't want to regret not trying. Plus I really wanted to learn Danish, and I knew that it would be impossible from France. I adapt easily to new environments, and it is much easier to move somewhere where you already know people – and I knew Line, her family and her friends. I was looking forward to a great experience living with Line. It was hard for my parents, though, to accept that I was moving away. It's only recently that they've accepted that it was my choice and that I am happy here.

Creative job-hunting

I haven't found work as an engineer yet, but I have two very exciting jobs. I searched for engineering jobs for eight months and had a few interviews, but there was always someone in front of me with more experience who got the job. I needed to work as we had only my girlfriend's income, so I decided to look for other kinds of work. Quickly I found two very different part-time jobs, working as a waiter in a restaurant, and as an interviewer/researcher in a company doing surveys and market research. I'm very happy about this – above all because I've improved my Danish so much. In the restaurant I speak Danish with the guests and with my colleagues.

Danish is hard, but you can definitely do it!

I study Danish at Lærdaensk language school. The teaching is good, and it was a big step forward for me to go to school, because I could start creating my own network and finding my...
own friends. For everyone who thinks Danish is an impossible language to learn – yes, it’s hard, yes, it sounds weird sometimes (try and say røget ørred and you’ll see!), but you can definitely do it. I was bad at languages until I understood a couple of years ago how valuable speaking a foreign language could be. I think learning Danish is a matter of willpower and attitude. You decide that you really want to learn and improve – so when you go into a shop to buy a sandwich, ask for it in Danish! Every chance you have, use Danish, even if it’s only a few words. I started doing voluntary work after I’d been here for six months, and I decided I just wouldn’t let myself speak English. I was a bit quieter than usual at first, but this is why I can now hold a conversation in Danish.

Moving on
I am starting to look for engineering jobs again now. I am optimistic, because my current jobs have given me the experience to be able to integrate in a Danish company.

After a bit more than a year in Denmark, I am glad I made the decision to move here, even though everything didn’t turn out as planned. For me, life is not just about following a plan! I am sure that in ten years, when I look back on this time – learning Danish with people from all over the world, living with my girlfriend, working in a super restaurant – I’ll think that what I experienced was so cool…

“You decide that you really want to learn and improve – so when you go into a shop to buy a sandwich, ask for it in Danish!”
"I struggled with my pronunciation in the beginning, and I am still struggling!"

I moved to Denmark because my husband was offered a job with Siemens Wind Power. In the beginning we lived in a small town called Jelling, but we moved to Aarhus two months later and my life in Denmark kicked off.

Language struggles
I got my CPR number and my yellow card and residence permit, so I could go to Danish classes. I didn’t have a job here, so I enrolled for full-time classes at the Lærdansk language school four days a week. Denmark may be the happiest country in the world, but its language is not as welcoming as you might expect. I struggled with my pronunciation in the beginning, and I am still struggling. It is said that Danes speak very good English and you don’t really need to speak Danish in order to live here. That’s true, but going to language school isn’t just about learning Danish, but about getting to know people in the same situation as you and building social contact with them. This is important, because you can exchange information and share experiences with them about living in Denmark.

Besides Lærdansk, I go to activities arranged by International Community and Aarhus Internationals. Like this I’ve built a basic contact to Danish society, though not much. For those who like to run or do sports, Aarhus is the perfect place to live and meet new people. There are beautiful sandy beaches at Bellevue in Risskov and near Moesgård, and the whole city is cycle-dominated and runner-friendly. Danes like doing sports, and there are all kinds of sports clubs to join and to meet people through.

There is still something missing, though – yes, a regular paid job. I speak some Danish now, and have made friends from Lærdansk with two Chinese girls and an Italian girl. We do sports together every week and go for coffee or go shopping. There is still something missing, though – yes, a regular paid job. I have been doing book translation for the past two years, and I can work everywhere as long as there is an internet connection to send work back to my editor in Taiwan. So I work, but not for a company in Denmark, and I have no colleagues.

Do I like living in Aarhus so far? Yes. Do I like Denmark and its people? Yes, I think Denmark is one of the most equal societies in the world and the Danes are genuinely friendly and sincere. Will I want to settle down here in the long term? Well, it depends on my husband’s job contract and also how we cope with the weather here. Summer is very short, and winter can seem like forever. But Aarhus is a pleasant city to live in, and the city centre and the sea can be easily accessed either on foot or by bike, so it is a great place for families with children.

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“What really improved things was going to Danish class”

My story started in July 2009 when I came to Denmark as an exchange student at Aarhus University. Scandinavian culture had always fascinated me, and as an exchange student I had the impression Denmark was perfect. The strong sense of community, the politeness of people everywhere, the trustworthiness – of course there’s the taxes and the weather, but how insignificant compared to the rest. Then I met a Dane and fell for him. We knew I would have to go back to Spain but we agreed we would figure out a way for me to return to Denmark.

Today I’m back, and he’s my fiancé. I finished my degree in Spain and hoped to find work here as a biologist. It wasn’t that simple. I sent hundreds of applications to companies and research institutions and all I got was rejections – how frustrating and disappointing that was. Then I lowered my standards and said to myself, “It’s okay if I don’t find a biology-related job to start with.” Well, after several months of looking for anything from cafés to kitchens to trying to work as a pædagogmedhjælper, I am still jobless. In the whole time I had one interview for a position in a canteen, and in the end I didn’t get the job.

The best way to get a job here is through a social network, but of course without my friends and family, with no job and on a very tight budget – the last thing I wanted to do was go out and make friends. Until I got my CPR number I couldn’t even take Danish lessons. That translated into many hours alone at home, drowning in my own moodiness. If I could go back in time, I’d travel to those first weeks and slap myself a couple of times. It is important to network. Go out, seek help.

Background: Age 25 from Barcelona, Spain
Moved to Denmark May 2011
Professional Profile: Bachelor’s Degree in Biology from University of Barcelona
Family Status: Engaged to Claus

Natalia
Once I finally accepted that Danes are different from Spanish people, I could see that they are pretty friendly, even though it is true it takes a while to actually become friends with them.

Forming a network

In the end I found an International Community CV seminar on the internet, and from then on I started to meet people. Work in Denmark and Aarhus Business School also run workshops for expats. Then what really improved things was going to Danish class at Lærdansk language school. I love it. The teachers are good and I could make my own friends from people who were in just the same situation as me, just arrived and looking for work. I wasn’t on my own any more.

Once I finally accepted that Danes are different from Spanish people, I could see that they are pretty friendly, even though it is true it takes a while to actually become friends with them. They are unintrusive to the point where it is going to be you who has to make the effort to build a relationship.

It is still difficult sometimes, but I am managing. I have made friends I can talk to who help me take my mind off things, and though I haven’t found a job yet, I’m hopeful. My Danish is getting better every day and that is very important. Of course my story doesn’t end here. I still have a long way to go, but I am almost sure the worst part is over and things will only get better.
“Had I realised the crucial impact that language school would have on my mood and my satisfaction with life in Denmark, I would have found a way to begin earlier.”

Arriving in Denmark after six years of marriage in the US, my Danish husband Jesper and I found ourselves facing significant changes in our new life here from what we had experienced before. We were to find that the new context of living in Denmark would present new angles on marital issues – issues that we thought were already handled.

Cultural differences, especially regarding values, proved to be more significant than expected. The power balance in our relationship had also shifted quite significantly in Jesper’s direction. For practical reasons, I was completely dependent on Jesper for talking to Danish officials, filling out government forms, translating (which he did as much as time would permit), and assessing what I would want to be consulted on. From time to time, inevitably, his assessment was wrong. I felt like a child. I couldn’t even order pizza over the phone.

I did have a great advantage over many expats, however. Jesper’s familiarity with government agencies, not to mention his fluent Danish, made getting a visa, a CPR number, medical care (I was seven months pregnant when we moved here), housing and our son’s day-care slot significantly easier. Thanks to him and his supportive and knowledgeable family, our first few months here went remarkably smoothly from a practical point of view.

Power dynamics
For me, however, the initial excitement of moving to Denmark soon mixed with feelings of invisibility, loneliness, low self-
worth, and sometimes awkward passive-aggressive assertions of my Americanness and my identity. My husband and I met living in Italy, and bonded through our shared outsider status. Together, we observed the Italian culture as if through an anthropologist’s lens. But creating a shared relationship narrative has proved much harder here in Aarhus, as there already existed a rich narrative for Jesper waiting to be resurrected, one filled with old family roles, friends, traditions, and nostalgia. I, by contrast, had no such narrative. I could rarely retreat to my old outsider role, since I was now part of a Danish family with its own culture and traditions. While this is a familiar story to anyone with in-laws, the cultural and language divide and my lack of power and connections in Denmark made this typical family dynamic much more powerful.

Language issues
Furthermore, without the language, I couldn’t be funny, I couldn’t discuss interesting or controversial subjects, I couldn’t be the devil’s advocate or defend someone who was being criticised, express compassion, communicate with Danish children, or remark on pop culture. In short, I couldn’t be me. I began to feel invisible, not only to Danes but to myself. As you might expect, this did not raise my self-esteem.

The language gap also meant that I could not size up group dynamics, whether in my husband’s family, my mothers’ group, or my Danish choir. In my earlier life in the US, I would have immediately started developing theories about group roles and relationships. Though often inaccurate, these theories gave me my social bearings and allowed me to find my own niche. Without that tool available in Denmark, I felt even more disoriented.

That I was disconnected from the international community during my first year in Denmark sharpened these emotions. Not until I began attending language school, a year after our arrival due to the birth of my son, did I begin to feel myself again. Our marital balance of power began to correct itself, because now there was something in Aarhus that was just ‘mine’, and realising that my experiences and reactions were shared by others helped to lessen their negative impact. I was also reminded that I was competent at something, namely school. It goes without saying that learning Danish has allowed me to understand a group’s dynamics and to find ways to express myself and my nationality with more nuance and subtlety. Had I realised the crucial impact that language school would have on my mood and my satisfaction with life in Denmark, I would have found a way to begin earlier.

Today I still experience frustration with many aspects of Danish culture, and visa problems and career obstacles may eventually send us back to the US, but I am far happier than when we arrived three years ago. I have reached a satisfactory though fragile détente with Danish society and culture.

“Not until I began attending language school, a year after our arrival due to the birth of my son, did I begin to feel myself again”
I soon realised I had to put in a bit more effort this time

I never thought that I would live in Denmark again. When I moved to America in 1997 to be with my American husband, life was all about fun and hard work. Then we had kids, and everything changed. After giving birth to our first child and my six-week maternity leave (that’s right!), I decided I was going to be a stay-at-home full-time mother from then on.

From stay-at-home mother to expat wife

As a Dane brought up in a society where this is just not considered a fulfilling life, I was thoroughly surprised at how it was in fact an incredibly fulfilling job. I think that having worked in America and having seen women who had made it back into the workforce after years at home, I knew that one day, when I was ready, I would be able to get a job again. So I became a housewife and, over the years, an expat wife.

My husband’s career started taking us places and I was happy about the way we had prioritised. I have been very privileged not only in being able to raise my children, but also in the many wonderful women I have met over the years who were in the same situation as me. In many countries there are expat communities, and arriving in a new place, very often I would find a circle of friends through our children’s pre-school, school or sports activities. However, we only lived in English-speaking countries, and we never had to worry much about language or too big a cultural
gap. This changed. In 2006, my husband told me he had been offered a new position in Denmark, a great opportunity for us to teach our children their heritage. Something awoke in me – the desire to hear my children speak my language and have the kind of childhood I had.

The challenge
When we moved to Denmark it was no ‘move back home’ for me! We moved to a small town outside Aarhus where I had never been before and knew no one. I was excited to start a new adventure, but soon realised I had to put in a bit more effort this time. The kids were at times very frustrated that they couldn’t communicate in their new setting, and I also discovered that the curiosity from our surroundings was kept at a distance. My husband was busy at his job. Even though his Danish was limited at the time, the corporate language of the business was English and he had been hired because he was an American, so he was fine.

I stayed home the first year in Denmark, as we wanted to settle in as well as do some home improvements on our new home. At lightning speed, the kids learned Danish. It has been an amazing experience for us as parents. We also soon realised that our neighbours were waiting for us to invite them over, because they didn’t want to intrude. The other parents at school were likewise giving us space until we were ready, and it has simply taken a bit longer to get settled here.

Making the effort, making friends
We discovered that inviting over for traditional foods or holiday celebrations from other countries is very popular. One of my favourite traditions from America is the holiday season cookie exchange. It is a simple concept of bringing a batch of cookies and exchanging with friends, so that you end up with a great variety of cookies after getting together. This was a big hit.

Getting the kids and ourselves involved in the local sports clubs – handball, football, gymnastics and bicycling – has also made a difference. I volunteer as the parent representative for my oldest son’s handball team, and my husband put a lot of effort into the establishment of a local cycling club. We have made sure that the clubs can count on us for driving, baking, and filling in forms, and we feel connected and respected in return. We have developed quite an impressive network in a short amount of time in this way. Involvement is highly respected, and for us it has been rewarded with some wonderful friendships and a sense of belonging. Knowing people is also one of the best ways to find a job, so the more effort you put into getting to know people, the bigger the chance of finding a job.

Today, four years later, I am a working mother with a great job, our children ride their bikes to school and have the childhood I was wishing for, they speak Danish as well as English, and my husband and I have a large circle of friends. I didn’t think I was ever going to live in Denmark again, but I am happy that I am.  

“We have developed quite an impressive network in a short amount of time”
The need for a network
Spouse Community

by Bente Cordes

The expat partner stories in this publication are personal. However, it is apparent that regardless of nationality, gender, educational level or whether you bring children with you or not, certain factors are always present. It is a universal experience to be excited at first, later to go through a tough time, and then eventually to settle into a new life.

As you read these stories you may recognise a curve that you experienced, or that you have witnessed at work or in your local community. You may be about to discover it yourself. Some recommendations on how to get through the hard times are made repeatedly. Some of these can be challenging to carry through in the middle of moving country, choosing schools, finding a house, figuring out the grocery store. But we are reminded again and again that learning Danish is a good idea, that getting involved where your interests lie is an opportunity not to miss, that looking after your own needs and well-being is essential to everyone around you, and last, that being proactive in building up your new friendships and networks is the gateway to feeling at home, and possibly to finding a job.

Providing the platform for building up networks among expat partners is the foundation of International Community’s Spouse Community. In the fall of 2009, the go-ahead was given for creating a network for and by expat partners. A few workshops were held, and the first meetings were scheduled soon after. Two years later, the network has grown to 150 active members. These are a dynamic group of people, and meetings are held once or twice a month.

No two meetings are alike and the meetings are as varied as the group itself. We visit cultural institutions, hold seminars, visit fellow expats who have started up their own businesses, and try to make sure that everything of possible interest is passed on to the group. At Spouse Community meetings there is always time for networking and catching up with fellow expats, as well as for seeking advice from International Community.

Spouse Community is also a place to meet internationally minded Danes who have been expats themselves or who are simply interested in meeting internationals. As the organiser of Spouse Community I fall into this category, and I have told my story here, to show that the ‘culture shock curve’ applies to all who move from one country to another, even if you are moving back to the country where you grew up.
International Community

International Community is a network for international employees and their families. It is our aim to give you the best possible experience of settling in Denmark and to make you feel at home.

As a member of International Community you will have access to both social and professional networks. Membership for expats and their families is free of charge.

International Community was established in 2008 by Erhverv Aarhus and is supported by Vestas, Danisco, Arla Foods, Best-seller, Grundfos, Aarhus University and the Municipality of Aarhus. More than 2,000 members, including companies, international employees, accompanying family members and international Danes, have already joined us.

Read more and become a member at www.internationalcommunity.dk.

What we offer to our members:

- Practical guidance – through our website, lectures and personal support
- International Citizen Service – introduction to living and working in Aarhus and in Denmark
- Events and seminars – expansion of your social and professional network
- Spouse community – support and network for international partners
- Weekly newsletter – information on events in and around Aarhus
- Online community InterCom – network with internationals and Danes and stay updated on cultural events and career opportunities

www.internationalcommunity.dk/intercom

Let’s Intercom

www.internationalcommunity.dk/intercom
In *Expat Partners: Our Stories*, eleven men and women who moved to the Aarhus area with their families give their personal narratives of what they experienced as they adjusted to life in a new society, and how they dealt with the challenges they met. Psychologist Dorte Kongerslev sets the stories in context with an overview of the cultural adjustment process. These authentic shared experiences are a resource for expat partners as they navigate the challenges of cultural adjustment and set about making a new life here.

The stories were commissioned by International Community.