



An erratic career as a trailing spouse. By Melissa Frost

The two passports I've had since I married my husband in 2000 are an accurate summary of my life as a Shell 'trailing spouse'. Multi-coloured stamps litter every page and document the many countries we've lived in (Gabon, South Korea, The Netherlands, Dubai) and travelled to on our Shell adventures.

My passports also contain my collection of residence visas; noticeably different to my husbands' because, unlike his, they stipulate clearly that I am not permitted to work "Status F-3", short-hand for a "Dependent Family Visa" appears on each of my 4 Korean visas, allowing me to accompany my spouse and children, but the rules at the time stipulated that I could not work.

"HOUSEWIFE/ Not allowed to work" is what is written against "Profession" in my UAE visa – wording. I sulkily interpreted that as suggesting I wasn't deemed worthy of anything beyond domestic duties.

"any new skill is worth having"

In truth, it was rather a luxury to be at home full-time with our three children without needing to work. But that differentiating and self-limiting status in my

passport began to play on my mind. It was like a red rag to a bull; the catalyst that ignited my rebellious side and made me wonder if I could somehow safeguard my career without breaking the law.

My options were limited. I didn't speak Korean, nor did I have permission to work or earn money in that country.

I knew that my previous career in market research and branding would be difficult, if not impossible to pursue, not least because we were based on such a remote island (Geoje-do) - nowhere near Seoul and its international research, marketing and branding agencies.

The internet provided a perfect gateway for me. Having always enjoyed reading and writing I started to do some online editing and ended up editing a small newsletter, followed by two novels.

The time difference, so often a challenge, was on my side as I could work uninterrupted while my colleagues in the UK were fast asleep and I could easily work around the demands of the children.

At the same time, I began volunteering, through that I learned to read and write Korean, which I later found to be an interesting skill to add to my CV - and a great conversation starter!

As a sweetener, we'd promised our daughter horse-riding lessons when we moved from Korea to Dubai and we found her a rather eclectic indoor riding school that offered bareback, stunt-riding and natural horsemanship. They were keen to reach out to schools and I offered to help set up their website and after school clubs and do a little bit of local PR for them in return for some riding lessons.

This kept me occupied for the best part of 2 years at the same time as learning how to hang sideways off a galloping horse!

Then a chance conversation at a school sports event, led me to a job with a London-based events company setting up an office in the Middle East. They were looking for someone with branding and marketing experience who could represent the company locally. At last I was given the option to change my visa status to a legitimate working one!

When, after 12 years abroad, we made the move back to our home country, I wasn't sure which of my many career 'hats' to wear on my CV - research, branding, editing, events, PR, new business development, communications?

It took a while to work out how best to leverage all of the experience that I had gained, somewhat erratically, overseas. I found that, while some employees will - frustratingly - only consider people with single-track careers, increasingly there are more and more employers who prefer more rounded, experienced members of staff.

I began to appreciate how valuable each of my overseas experiences had been, however un career-focussed - they had seemed at the time.

I am now working for a small company where all of my various skills and experiences are put into play every week. Small companies are particularly keen on well-rounded individuals as everyone needs to roll up their sleeves to get things done.

I would advise any 'trailing spouses' who may be despairing about how to keep their careers alive to just keep busy; any new skill is worth having; volunteering work is as valuable as paid work at so many different levels; the internet is a hive of information and opportunities and it all adds up in the end.

Small companies will probably appreciate your range of skills more readily than larger corporates, but the world is changing... Rather than feeling a sense of frustration or loss, try to embrace the opportunities that are on each of your different doorsteps, wherever you are in the world and whatever it says in your passport!

