

Sophie in the land of the Mullahs: from clichés to the reality of expatriation

Case study

Ludovic Caillaud, Audrey Rouzies¹

Institute of Business Administration, Toulouse 1 University Capitole

After saying goodnight to his chauffeur, Peter looked at his watch – it was already 9pm... Ever since he had started reviewing the bids at the beginning of the month, he was rarely home before dark. He walked through the garden, past the swimming-pool and up the steps to the large silent villa. Sophie was in the lounge. She was crying over the phone: “I’m afraid I won’t be able to stick it out till the end of the year, Mum”.

Sophie and Peter² have been living in Iran for eight months. Peter was sent to Iran in May 2008 by his employer (a Norwegian construction company) to manage the purchasing and logistics function of a large construction project for a period of eighteen months.

Peter is 28 and was born in Norway. After completing his secondary education, he moved to France to study economics at the University of Toulouse. He spent the third year of his degree in Madrid (Spain), where he specialized in management. After returning to Toulouse, Peter began a master’s degree in international management taught in English. During his studies, he completed several work placements in Norway and France. After being recruited by a Norwegian company, he opted for a pathway designed for young executives that involved a series of assignments in Sweden, Denmark, Algeria and Libya.

Sophie is French and is 26 years old. She studied law at the University of Toulouse, which is where she met Peter. They quickly became engaged. Peter returned to Norway for his first job. In order to be closer to him, Sophie decided to spend an exchange year in Sweden. She then joined Peter in Norway while enrolling on a distance training course in human resource management. Sophie greatly enjoyed this period of her life.

“... I worked as a cook in an Italian restaurant for about a month, (then) I saw an advert for a job in an international school ... the French cook at the cafeteria was looking for an assistant ... I cooked and served the food to the children, and it was fantastic ... I loved it, and I found it really quite difficult to leave the job (...) we had a good team – in fact, we became real friends. It was actually really great... [I loved] working with the children, and with the teachers too. I also got a social life thanks to my job... the cook taught me a lot of things about cooking... in one word, it was brilliant! (...) Alongside my job, I also started a training course (in human resource management). I’d work all day and in the evenings I’d take classes on an online teaching platform, so I was pretty busy.”

Iran? No way!

After two years of observation, and recognizing his skills, the company offers Peter several options to work abroad – Brazil, Algeria or Iran. Peter knows that this is an important stage in his career since his company rarely sends young managers to work abroad. He also realizes that he cannot afford to pass on this opportunity. After weighing up his options, Peter decides that although it would be a challenge, Iran would probably be the most lucrative option in career terms. It remains for him to convince Sophie.

“Sophie’s initial response was to say ‘no way!’. She said she was happy in Norway, what with her work and her studies. I explained the benefits of being an expatriate – my wage, the good living conditions, travelling to Dubai and Oman at weekends... in any case we had less than a week to make up our minds”.

When Peter tells her about the job offer, Sophie has two reactions: *“at first I was scared. Iran isn’t any old country... My parents reacted well, although they must have been worried. They really tried to be supportive and not to make any judgments, and they asked all the right questions... I did some research and what I saw frightened me... you read all sorts of things online and in the papers, so I wasn’t reassured... The company put me in touch with Ingrid, Olav’s wife, Peter’s future manager in Iran, who’d been living there for two and half*

¹ This case study was designed based on a project conducted in class by Julie Doumer, Lionel Duval, Valérie Gouzy, Ana Munoz, Mickael Rousseau and Philippe Zeinoun, all students on the masters (M2) in international management at the IAE (Institute of Business Administration) in Toulouse.

² This case study is based on a real case of expatriation. For reasons of confidentiality, the names of the individuals and the company have been changed. The authors are extremely grateful to “Peter” and “Sophie” for their contribution.

years. Olav suggested that I phone her to ask her anything I wanted... at least it gave me an objective view of things like clothes, safety on the streets... Then the decision was made very quickly. It wasn't easy, but I see it as a challenge..."

After Peter agrees to take the job, the company begins to plan their relocation. In theory, the relocation procedure involves a seminar over a day and a half on the culture, history and life of the country of destination, followed by a two-week trip for the expatriate and their family. However, given the urgency of the situation, Sophie and Peter are only able to attend the seminar. Rather than travelling to Iran before their relocation, they must settle for a CD of photos taken by an Iranian employee.

Working with Iranians

Peter and Sophie arrive in Tehran in the spring sun. They spend the first days together and make the most of the pleasant living conditions of Western expatriates in Iran. Their house is in the wealthiest and most pleasant part of the city, at the foot of the mountains. Sophie, who had assumed that Iranian women wore only black, is surprised to see that chadors come in a wide range of colors. After just a few days at work, Peter realizes that he enjoys interacting with his Iranian colleagues. Peter is used to working with international teams, and while he knows that communication problems are likely to arise, he is prepared for them. He makes the most of his experience by using a tried and tested "method" that involves learning about the country, its history and its main features before showing his colleagues that he is interested in their culture and respects their way of life. Peter knows that adapting to an international team requires patience and empathy.

Most of the Norwegian members of the project are in their fifties and have extensive professional experience. However, for most of them, Iran is their first experience of working abroad. Despite being the youngest member of the team, Peter has spent more years outside his native country than most of his Norwegian colleagues.

After a few weeks, Peter realizes that working and negotiating with Iranian partners is easier than dealing with the Arab entrepreneurs with whom he had previously worked. His Iranian colleagues appear to be more composed. As far as his collaborators are concerned, Peter finds that there are significant differences with the Norwegians:

"Sometimes there can be clashes – of course, it's never violent, but there can be frustration on both sides... the Norwegian managers and the Iranians have different decision making styles, and time has a different meaning. In Iran, hierarchy is very important, and it seems to me that Iranians need to be managed more firmly. Projects have to be managed from A to Z. Iranians don't like to take initiatives, whereas in Norway people are positively encouraged to take initiatives and are allowed to fail. Norwegians also tend to be less concerned about hierarchy. For example, it's OK for me to make a joke about my boss in public... which would be inconceivable in Iran".

Peter has no regrets about his decision to move to Iran, although he does miss pork and a glass of wine every now and then. The drawback is that he works 50 to 60 hours a week, not including the time it takes to travel to work and the work he does at home. Since Thursdays and Fridays are the two non-working days in Iran, Peter often has to be available to communicate with the head office on his days off, to the detriment of his weekends with Sophie.

Sophie's world

As soon as she arrives in Iran, Sophie starts to look for a job in human resources and has several interviews with Western companies operating in Tehran. However, she is unable to find a job. In an effort to make the best of a bad situation, Sophie decides to make the most of the exceptional living conditions for a young woman her age (e.g. the swimming-pool, the servants, and the services provided).

"Peter's company takes good care of us (...) perhaps a bit too much – everything revolves around the company. The only people I get to see are Norwegians. There's a small community of wives of expatriates, and they're all between 50 and 60... As I'm on my own in the daytime, I've tried to build a relationship with my driver, who speaks English and teaches me things about Iran. With the maid, we pretend to understand each other and we have tea together..."

Sophie must comply with a very strict dress code. Whenever she leaves the house, she must wear a veil covering her head and shoulders and loose-fitting clothes to hide her arms and legs. If she infringes these rules, Sophie exposes herself, and her driver, to severe punishment. Despite these restrictions, Sophie is keen to explore her

surroundings. However, her isolation and the difficulties caused by traffic, pollution and communication with the Iranians tend to discourage her.

“I try to live in the present. Although I must admit that I’ve started to take a dislike to it all ... everything seems to get to me. For example, a few days ago, it started to snow and we had no electricity for six and a half hours, and nothing worked... so in my mind a tiny little problem becomes a huge issue... ultimately, that’s what annoys me the most: being alone and thinking about things that just don’t matter. If I were in France, I wouldn’t even be thinking about things like that. In Iran, everything becomes bigger than it really is, which seems to be a common experience among wives of expatriates... You become a bit obsessed about everyday life and your immediate survival in the house... practical problems become really important.

Sometimes, things just get on top of me and I’ll take a sudden dislike to something. At times like that, I just can’t stand the sight of people. And I can’t bear wearing the headscarf anymore. For a woman, it’s a huge physical constraint to have to wear it. At first I was OK with it, but strangely enough the longer I’m here, the more unbearable I find it. I find it humiliating, and without wanting to judge, I don’t think any woman finds it comfortable. You see women readjusting their headscarves all the time... If I were a man, I wouldn’t have to wear it. I could be myself. Peter doesn’t see anything wrong with it... but it’s really a straitjacket. (...) Anyway... things will get better eventually. But I do feel that things are getting harder for me, what with not doing anything. If I had a job, I’d find it easier to cope with Peter being out all day... it’s not his fault... But sometimes he works six or even seven days a week. On some days, he even works at home in the evenings... We’re OK, so it’s fine. (...) But I think that what I miss is contact with people my age. All I do now is just stay at home and I avoid going out as much as possible.”

One year is quite enough for Sophie, and what she wants above all is to leave the country. She is not against the idea of living abroad, but it is out of the question for her to live in the Middle East or Africa again. She hopes to go to a country where she can find a job that matches her ambitions.

Epilogue

Peter’s company is struggling to find a replacement for him. They have offered him a promotion in Iran on the condition that he agrees to stay there for at least one more year. Sophie was offered a three-month work placement in the company. However, because of the political unrest surrounding the presidential elections in the spring of 2009, she was forced to leave the country after just a few weeks in her new position. She has only just been reunited with Peter after two months apart, but is already thinking of returning to Europe to do her end of studies work experience.

Peter summarizes the situation: *“I’m faced with a real dilemma: either I stay in Iran to finish the project and I give myself more time to find a new job or I leave Iran to stay close to Sophie”*.

Questions about the case

Question 1: Are Peter and Sophie suited to living abroad? Why?

Question 2: Assess the quality of the preparation for, and conditions of, their expatriation.

Question 3: Once settled in Iran, what difficulties did Peter and Sophie face?

Question 4: Imagine you are Olav, Peter's manager. You have read a recent study explaining that most failed expatriations are due to the partner. What measures will you take to ensure that their experience abroad ends well?

Appendix 1: Presentation of Iran

Iran is a country in the Middle-East located between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. The capital of Iran is Tehran. The country is divided into thirty provinces populated by approximately 70 million inhabitants. Iran has borders with Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and Turkmenistan. The country's population is composed of many ethnic groups, including 51% of Persians. The official language is Farsi, which has a similar alphabet to Arabic. Known historically as Persia, Iran is one of the cradles of humanity. In the West, Iran is mostly known for its recent history, and in particular the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which ended the reign of the dictator Mohammad Reza "Shah" Pahlavi. Since the revolution, Iran has been an Islamic republic under the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors. Political power is in the hands of the religious authorities, and religion pervades the private, economic and political life of the country. Islam imposes various obligations on believers, including praying five times a day, the prohibition of alcohol and pork, and the Ramadan (the month of fasting). In Iran, weekends are on Thursdays and Fridays. Since the revolution, a set of strict social rules have governed Iranian society. Women must wear a headscarf concealing their hair (chador) and clothes covering most of their body. Men must also wear long clothes.

Nearly a million Iranians died as a result of the war with Iraq between 1980 and 1988. After the war, nearly 300 billion dollars were spent on reconstructing the country. Currently, the Iranian economy (2008) is mainly based on the oil and gas industry, which accounts for 70% of the national income and 80% of the country's exports. There is a high level of state intervention in Iran. According to some sources, the state employs nearly 90% of the population. Because of the positions it has taken on the international scene, Iran is subject to various economic sanctions. Since 1996, the United States has imposed an embargo on imports of Iranian oil and other products, and also forbids American businesses from investing in Iran. Since then, the country has initiated a policy of privatization and openness by encouraging foreign investment, notably from Europe.

Appendix 2: Copy of an email from Olav K., Peter's immediate superior

"Hi Peter,

Ingrid and I really enjoyed having dinner with your partner on Thursday evening. The French cuisine from the South-West was just perfect. Without wishing to interfere... I thought Sophie was a bit absent, or perhaps slightly depressed? Having spent the last 15 years working abroad, I know from experience how difficult it can be for the wives [of expatriates]. Ingrid generally adapts very well, but she really didn't enjoy our time in Azerbaijan because the children were at boarding school in Switzerland and she couldn't work. I know you're really excited about the job and you're starting out in your career, but do be careful not to neglect your personal life. I hope you won't mind this 'intrusion' on my part...

By the way, don't forget the report on the construction project, which needs to be sent to head office by next week.

Olav."

Appendix 3: Benefits provided to Peter and Sophie

- Relocation expenses and allowance for the partner
- Fully equipped and furnished house, with swimming-pool and garden in Tehran
- Heating and electricity
- House staff
- Car with driver
- Access to a sports club, with swimming-pool and golf for the family
- Persian language lessons
- Specific supplementary pension for the employee and their partner
- International health insurance
- Dedicated health service
- Unlimited international calls and internet
- Allowance for travelling throughout the region (Dubai, Oman, internal flights within Iran)
- Return flights to Europe several times a year
- Permanent security service provided by the company