

Book reviews

Reviewer [George Simons](#), SIETAR member

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Author Margaret Malewski (GenXpat)
William R. Melton (New American
Expat)

Title GenXpat: The Young Professional's
Guide to Making a Successful Life
Abroad

and



The New American Expat: Thriving and
Surviving Overseas in the Post 9/11
World

Publisher [Nicholas Brealey/Intercultural Press](#)

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Expatriation is changing. Once it consisted largely of upper level managers who were treated almost like ambassadors in their overseas assignments—all expenses paid, all needs cared for. Expert teams sometimes visited but did not stay for more than was needed for the installation or transfer of some specific technology. Today, many more levels of people may be sent abroad, recruited from abroad or set off on their own to find work in another part of the world.

Two recent books address this new situation. Margaret Malewski's GenXpat addresses the needs and experiences of the young mobile "Generation X" individuals and couples (those born between 1964 and 1981) wherever they may come from. SIETAR Europa Congress 2005 visitors may remember Margaret and her presentation on the topic. William Russell Melton's The New American Expat addresses is less age specific though it covers many of the same dynamics and practicalities, but it has the added focus of how the shift in circumstances created by 9/11 comes into play for expats coming from the USA. Both these books are handy toolboxes for individuals immersed in the new globalism. They meet a demand for broadened knowledge of the international work world and the cultural competence it requires. In any case, today's expat is very much more on his or her own than in the past and the information and advice provided by these authors is most welcome.

What does it take to succeed in these new circumstances? The challenge starts inside, where the individual needs to work through the reasons, challenges and desires that bring him or her to seek or accept expatriation. "Know thyself," is broadened to "Know thyself as a cultural being." For Malewski, it is the task of the young person to stretch awareness to the impact one has in a new environment as well as the impact of the new environment on the expat. The genXpat faces the developmental challenges of his or her stage of life accentuated by having to fulfill them in an alien context. Malewski has lots of tips for this. For both authors the inner

work is a matter of tempering both enthusiasm and fears with reality, different but not insurmountable. For Malewski there is a focus on the energies of youth, the needs for establishing competence, caring for personal, social and relational needs. For Melton there is also the need to know what you want and to bring “the right stuff” to the challenge.

While strongly addressing the individual it would be unfair to present either book as limited to adjustment in the emotional and psychological sense. Quite the contrary, both contain extensive treatment, hard information and advice on how to understand corporate expat and relocation policies, how to plan our expatriation, the practicalities of job seeking, negotiating and contracting, getting paid, moving house, settling in and managing cultural differences in work and in life. Resources are listed and explained. These are full handbooks for making the transition.

Melton early on considers how US policy in the post-9/11 world affects how the US expat is viewed and received abroad. When a recently aired Osama bin Laden Tape threatened US people for their support of the Bush policies, it was disheartening to hear that war would be waged on the civilians who were assumed to support such a government, but in fact he was not far from the adage attributed to Thomas Jefferson, that “people get the government they deserve.” So the US expat, given the current political environment, has to ask and understand just how much anti-Americanism is out there to be faced, what does it look like, and what to do about it.

Anti-Americanism can be anything from the Yank stereotypes that Brits, French or Germans may express or act out over a pot in the pub, on one hand, to the possibility of abduction and death in risky areas or even targeted terrorist aggression in assumedly safe environments. These are realities of a different sort. The first asks of us humility and behavior that consistently calls into question the stereotypes others have of us; the second begs precise security measures and personal habits of caution. Both authors deal with ethnocentrism and cultural competence. Melton devotes a chapter specifically to the latter need for hard security data and the practice of safety measures.

Whether the spirited expat pays attention to the cautionary advice not is the question. Recently I was called upon to provide a cross-cultural briefing for young photojournalists entering conflict zones. My cultural insights and tips were complemented by survival advice from seasoned military professionals. In either case the challenge was to get these young people to keep their enthusiasm for their art as well as to convince them that they were mortal—not an easy task.

On the other hand, “the ugly American” can be an unfair stereotype, but it can and often is confirmed by naiveté, studied ignorance, flouting custom and arrogance—it is to me a stunning paradox that, given our diverse roots, we have created such an insular society. 9/11 has if anything reinforced the insularity and xenophobia felt by many as well as in some cases missionary zeal toward the rest of the world. We should be aware that, willy-nilly, we carry this image of the contemporary American with us when going abroad and expatriation is our opportunity to confirm or dissolve it to the degree that we can.

Malewski and Melton both stress fun and adventure. Malewski’s concern is making sure you find and enjoy life when lost and wandering in a new world, while Melton’s insists that making the expatriation experience an adventure is a key strategy for success. It prevents our

becoming bogged down in the depressive curve of what others describe as the culture shock that is likely to occur on either end of the expatriation.

Which book should you read? Probably both if you are a professional engaged in preparing or supporting people of various ages and professions going abroad. This way you can pick on which to recommend to your clients. Age, personal and business circumstances may incline potential expats to go one way or the other, but in neither book is the reader likely to become disappointed with what is offered. International business and intercultural communications courses may also benefit from the dose of realism them bring if made part of a bibliography or reading list. Then there are some readers like myself, who can open these books at random and generally find something to make me say, "Yup, that's right. Been there, done that." Or "Wow, I wish I had known that thirty years ago!"