

International Moves: Things to Know Before You Go

BY PENNY SHAWAH

Planes, trains, and automobiles—just a small checklist of options for moving household goods across national borders. Shawah writes that there is no way to remove all the challenges of a global move, but does provide the ins and outs, dos and don'ts, and professional tricks and tips for all facets of international mobility.

As an army brat, Christine Lee moved around a lot. From California to Italy, from England to Nebraska, from Georgia to Spain—another move every six months to two years. The military didn't move the family; the Lees had to rely on independent service vendors in the United States and overseas. And they had to rely on themselves, as often is the case when a family moves abroad. Sometimes that can be the hardest part. With stressed-out family members often getting downright nasty, many times it came down to their service providers making sure everyone, and everything, survives a move.

Despite a halfhearted wish to forget most of it, Lee, co-host of the popular “Craig & Company” radio show on WTIC in Hartford, CT, remembers quite a bit. While she laughs about it now, the stress on the family and the occasional snafus remain memorable: parents sniping at each other, endless mind-numbing lists to make and follow, the occasional missing item...

To be sure, with so much to pack, even the most organized family or relocation service provider can misplace something from time to time, and sometimes things just fall off, fall apart, or fall through the cracks.

“Some of the things that went missing? The mahogany gear shift knob on our Fiat Spider 124, for one thing. And often I wondered if I originally had a sister who somehow got lost among all the boxes,” jokes Lee.

It would be a lot more fun if not for the fact that international relocation is such a ruthlessly serious business. Family livelihoods often depend on it. And despite advances in communication and computer technologies, it has gotten even a little more complex today because of heightened security measures, volatile financial markets, and new cultural challenges resulting from increased accessibility to China, India and other emerging markets. What's more, in today's global economy, some companies seek ways to cut costs of international relocation by getting their employees to do a few years worth of work in just a few months, thereby shortening time away and reducing overall expenses. That doesn't make for a simpler relocation process, however; everything still has to be shipped back and forth.

All in all, it seems as if the “what-to-think-about-and-what-to-know” list for international relocation has gotten to be at least five times longer than the packing list. Maybe it is. Maybe it has to be.



“To be honest, often the biggest challenge of all is one that is completely out of our hands, because it has no relation to plans, lists or skills. That challenge is Mother Nature herself: blizzards, hurricanes, earthquakes,” says Bob Gallucci, GMS, senior vice president of William B. Meyer, Inc., the Stratford, CT-based transportation and storage provider, which has been involved in international relocations for more than 20 years. “But we try to minimize the effects of unwelcome, disruptive weather by having open, proactive, minute-by-minute communication with all of our relocation partners, including steamship operators and customs officials. That makes a big difference.”

So does knowing the ins and outs, do’s and don’ts, and professional hints and tips of international relocation. Here, then, are most of them.

To Pack or Not to Pack?

Communication is always a key component of successful relocation. It’s not just verbal communication that’s important, either, but written communication, as well. One of the most crucial things to do when you’re preparing for an international move is to set aside a separate room (or at least a portion of a room) in your current home for those items that should not be included in the inventory for the service provider to pack and ship. These items should clearly be labeled “DO NOT PACK.” This includes anything with sentimental value, such as jewelry, keepsakes and photos, important documents such as tax returns and passports, prescription drugs, computer disks or flash drives with important personal or professional information, and other items that

may be needed at a moment’s notice or that have a special meaning.

You also should make an effort to downsize in terms of what you will need to bring with you overseas. The less you pack, the less chance there is of something going wrong.

By Air or By Sea?

Another important component is determining which items to send by air and which by sea. Doing an analysis of what it would cost and how long it would take to send certain items by land or by sea, and then measuring that against the overall importance of those items, can help you determine the best route. A skilled service provider can guide you. In short, many things that are critical to have the moment you arrive in your new residence should be shipped by air, but things such as clothing, toiletries, kitchen items and most furniture can go by sea.

Paperwork?

Keeping important documents aside is one thing; making sure you have them all in the first place is another. Not having all the customs and immigration paperwork in order and readily available at domestic and foreign airports, hotels, consulates, train stations, corporate offices and other locations can lead to mix-ups, problems and costly and lengthy delays. One of the most frustrating scenarios is to have your entire shipment successfully reach its overseas destination, only to have it held up indefinitely by customs in a foreign country. Important documents may include academic records; birth certificates; lists of important phone numbers, e-mail addresses and fax numbers; living wills or testaments; marriage certificates; medical

records; social security cards; and work visas.

All the Other “Stuff?”

International relocation requires us to think about some things that we may not think of during a typical American afternoon. It requires another list—and once again, it’s a long one:

Auto insurance. Will you need a special policy overseas, or a special driver’s license?

Bank accounts. Will you have to open one in your new country? And if so, will you have the appropriate paperwork to do so?

Cell phones, laptops and portable electronic devices. Will they work in the country you’re going to? Will you need special attachments or adapters?

Debts. Do you have outstanding ones you should take care of before you leave (including credit card balances and mortgages)?

Health care and life insurance. Will you need new policies overseas? Should you contact your current broker to discuss what’s covered, where, under what circumstances and for how long?

Insurance. Have you insured the move? If so, is it enough?

Living will and testament. Do you need to update it, copy it, or take out one for the first time?

Money. Will you have enough with you, and in the proper currency? Will you need traveler’s checks or other kinds of legal tender?

Moving date. Have you selected a good one? The beginning and end of every month is typically the busiest for international moves. Will foreign holidays get in the way?

Pets. If you plan on bringing yours, will they be allowed where

you're staying? (And does your pet have the proper shots and paperwork?)

Restrictions and taxes. Will some of the items you are taking bring along with them a few unexpected surprises?

Schooling. Have you conducted enough research concerning your children's education and day care while overseas?

Translation. Will you need a book or digital device to help you communicate?

Vaccinations. Have you had all the appropriate ones?

Argument or Discussion?

While the service providers are important, never underestimate the value of having several long, comprehensive family meetings about the upcoming move. Together you might come up with things you may not think of on your own, and together you can keep each other grounded in a calm and reasonable approach to the effort. Everyone can be given a specific job to do. There's comfort in numbers: no one family member should ever be expected to do it all alone.

Sometimes the movers themselves can feel the sting of emotion when families are involved—that is, the families they're moving.

Lee, the army brat radio host who has enough stories to fill a book, remembers how tense it sometimes got during her family's many COTs (consecutive overseas tours).

"Whenever we would move, mom would orchestrate it, but my dad, the original Great Santini, would irritate her no end, fighting about what went in what box. And they would fight right in front of the movers. But if you want to know the



truth, I wasn't embarrassed. Dad was just being Dad."

This One or That One?

To locate an appropriate international mover, begin by interviewing companies as early in the process as possible—in fact, try to begin the week you find out that you'll be leaving the states. The service provider you select should be one with which you are most comfortable, the one that has plenty of experience and good references, knowledge of the rules, practices and technologies on the arrival end (which are sometimes different from the rules, practices and technologies on the departure end), and can dedicate a single moving coordinator to your move. The coordinator will confer with packing crews, ocean liners, airlines, overseas customs officials, overseas delivery crews and many others. In short, the coordinator will deal with a dozen or so parties, while you will have to deal with just one. That will be a pleasure. For example, there happens to be a shortage of steamship trunk carriers and containers in the world today,

and that's something that only a skilled international relocation coordinator will be able to both anticipate and resolve.

You also want a company that has evolved with the times, both in terms of technology and trends, has a well-trained staff and a documented network of service providers overseas with which it has worked in the past. And, of course, you want one that will do whatever it takes to solve a problem.

"Recently, a young woman was moving from New York City to England, but misplaced her passport just before the move," recalls Chad Francis, international business development manager at William B. Meyer. "She called her moving coordinator and told him it may have been packed in a small box that was taken from her bedroom. But we maintain such specific, well-organized inventory lists that we were able to find the box with the passport in no time at all. The coordinator even drove it out to her house in person so that she was able to take her flight later that same evening."

All-in-all, moving overseas can sometimes be a stressful experience, but in most cases, a truly exhilarating one. With the right preparation, a few checklists, and some open dialogue, the right service provider will make the process a smooth one without the headaches that Christine Lee remembers. After all, even if all the trunks, crates, boxes and suitcases arrive safely at their destination by air and by sea, if you don't get there, what's the point? ■

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