



Creating new family traditions when you're abroad

International assignments offer tremendous career development opportunities. Adapting to a new culture and often a very different way of life can pose both professional and personal challenges. This is especially true when religious or national holidays occur – both those of your home country and those of your new location. They can make you feel disconnected from your neighbours and/or work team and possibly increase feelings of alienation and homesickness for your entire family.

One way to make the adaptation process easier is to understand and explore the cultural and national celebrations of your host country while continuing to honour your own. In the process, your family creates new traditions, memories and unique experiences.

The importance of traditions

Our culture and its observances and traditions anchor us to our family, background, faith, country and community. Religious holidays reinforce our belief systems while national holidays centre around the values of a country.

Many traditions and celebrations are shared within a larger community. Others are unique to our family. Whether it's the Fourth of July or Chinese New Year; Hanukkah or Diwali; Eid El-Fitr or Christmas; birthdays or weddings; the way our families celebrate provides a sense of identity, belonging and stability to us all.

When we move to another country, even one with the same language and similar culture, traditions and celebrations can be very different. For example, Americans and Canadians may seem quite similar but their national holidays and associated values are not. Also in large diverse countries like India, celebrations and observances vary from region to region.

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One thing festivals, holidays and celebrations around the world have in common is that they bring people together. Finding ways to connect your traditions with those of your host country is the key to successfully navigating two cultures – and twice the number of holidays!

Combining cultures

Your children are likely to adapt quickly to their host country. It's not unusual for expat or immigrant children to have a foot in both their new and home cultures. They can help you get involved with local festivals and celebrations and you can help reconnect them to their culture – by creating new family traditions.

Here are some tips to get you, your family and your work colleagues through the holidays – wherever you are.

- Don't be afraid to ask people what holidays they celebrate and the special meaning they have for them. Find out what they do during this time of the year that is special. Let it be an opportunity to learn about different cultures and religions and the traditions that accompany them.
- If you're a non-Muslim working in a Muslim country, be especially respectful during the holy month of Ramadan. Although non-Muslims are not expected to fast, they are expected not to eat, drink or smoke in public during fasting hours. This includes chewing gum. Public displays of affection, such as hugging, are frowned upon as is playing music or dancing. Also remember, of course, consuming alcohol is never allowed.
- Many festivals around the world, including Christmas, Chinese New Year and Diwali involve giving gifts. In some countries, it is expected even in the workplace. However, there are often strict protocols about what kind of gift is given and how it is presented. These celebrations are a wonderful way for all cultures to come together. Find out what is appropriate around giving gifts and consider taking part.
- If you celebrate Christmas, the idea of a traditional Christmas tree may not be feasible in some locations. Do as your neighbours do. In India for example, Christians decorate mango or banana trees or use their leaves to decorate their homes.
- Don't try to replicate recipes exactly. Don't stress if you can't find cranberry sauce for the turkey or lotus seed paste for the moon cakes. Substitute with a local alternative.
- Identify what you love about a holiday -- a favourite movie, gift-giving, a decoration, a favourite food, a custom – and focus on that. Bring a few lightweight items from home – cookie cutters, religious symbols, ornaments, music or movies.
- Incorporate technology and connect to family overseas. Skyping Grandma as her grandchildren open presents at Christmas, Diwali, Hanukkah or Chinese New Year can be part of your new experience. Plan ahead so there are no disappointments. Share your culture with fellow expats and new local friends with a group feast. Prepare some of your traditional food and invite your guests to bring a dish from their homeland (be sure to advise them of any dietary restrictions or guidelines). Everyone enjoys discovering and sharing great food!

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- If you are invited to join in the celebrations of a local festival or tradition, don't hesitate. It's another great way to learn more about your host culture and incorporate new traditions into your life.
- Many celebrations around the world involve visiting neighbours and co-workers. This can be a wonderful way to get to know local neighbours by showing respect for their culture and become part of the community. Know what foods to offer and gifts (if any) you're expected to bring.
- Your host country may celebrate the same holidays you do – but in a different way. For example, Christmas. Depending on the country, children can be waiting for Santa, Father Christmas, Pere Noel, Babbo Natale, Sinterklaas, Julenisse or Saint Nicolas. In some countries, Christmas is associated with sleighs and snow, in others, the beach. Also everywhere Christmas is celebrated, you'll find different traditional foods. Your children may want to do what their local friends do, so consider incorporating local foods and traditions into your day.

You may not be able to celebrate your culture's holidays and celebrations in the same way as your family and friends back home but by creating new traditions and exploring the traditions of your host country you'll have the best of both worlds – and enjoy more excitement and fun than ever before.

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