

The World Is Your Lab on a Postdoc or Sabbatical Abroad

Graduate students dream of it and tenured professors get a shot at it every seven years. The chance to work abroad, either for postdoctoral training or a sabbatical, is “one of the unique opportunities we have in science,” says Joel Rothman, who did a postdoctoral fellowship in Cambridge, England, and a sabbatical leave in Paris, France. Scientists who have done a foreign postdoc or sabbatical say it’s the experience of a lifetime, and are eager to offer encouragement and advice. **By Chris Tachibana**



Kate Jackson removing a snake from a net in a swamp in the Republic of Congo.

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Doing research in a foreign country begins with finding a suitable lab. Professors looking for an overseas sabbatical lab can rely on their established network, but graduate students looking for a postdoc abroad must create a connection to the international community. Talking at an international meeting makes you visible, and may even get you an offer on the spot. **Elke Küster-Schöck** was a graduate student at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, when she attended a Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory meeting in New York. “It was a small enough conference to really meet people,” she says. “I presented my graduate work, and actively participated in the discussions. I was approached by Alan Grossman, who organized a ride to Boston for me, where I interviewed for a postdoc position in his lab at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. I got the offer before I even went back to Germany!”

If the international community comes to you, take advantage of it. As a graduate student at the University of Oregon, **Joel Rothman**, chair of Molecular, Cellular and Developmental Biology at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB), had been considering a postdoc at the Medical Research Council (MRC) in the United Kingdom, so when a seminar speaker came from the MRC, Rothman took him out for a drink. After a long, late-night conversation, he decided that when he met the MRC’s requirement that postdocs bring their own funding, he would go. “Living in another country for a while is a fabulous experience,” he says. “The social and scientific interactions are different from what you get from just passing through at a conference.”

ADVANCE PREPARATION

Working abroad means confronting a country’s immigration system, and this often comes with at least a little bureaucracy.

Küster-Schöck, who moved to Montreal, Canada, after her postdoc in the United States says, “Each country confronts newcomers with a dazzling array of administrative hurdles to pass.” Start gathering the necessary documents and forms as soon as you know where you are going, and if you will be working at a large university or research institution, contact its international services office. Be prepared for paperwork, and waiting periods of weeks or months. **Robert Eisenman** recently took a sabbatical from Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center to work at the University of Tokyo in Japan. He says, “There were a lot of forms to fill out, but it’s the same everywhere. I got no sympathy from the foreigners in my lab who had been through the US immigration process.” While waiting for your work permits and visas, read about your new home, and if you don’t know the language, do your best to learn it. Eisenman recommends, “Know as much as you can of the history and the language of the place you’re going to. You need to at least try, or you won’t get much out of it.”

Scientists doing a sabbatical abroad may have a house and a family to consider. To help pay the mortgage at home and rent in another country, Rothman recommends services like sabbatical-homes.com, which can help you rent your home, find a place in your new city, or even swap with another professor **continued »**

UPCOMING FEATURES

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Faculty: Small vs. Large Universities—September 10

Focus on Germany—September 24

POSTDOC 2: SABBATICALS ABROAD



“Each country confronts newcomers with a dazzling array of administrative hurdles to pass.”

— Elke Küster-Schöck

whose sabbatical plans mirror your own. Be prepared to spend some time searching for a place to live, and don't be afraid to ask for advice. A good resource for informal help is your new lab, where someone might be willing to recommend neighborhoods, or even to look through ads.

Rothman and his wife Molly took two children, ages 8 and 14, along on their French sabbatical at the Jacob Monod Institute, and they acknowledge the move was initially stressful for the kids. “We saw some tears in the first month,” he says, “but by the time we left, they didn't want to leave Paris.” Finding a school is the first task for getting kids settled, and again, the locals in the lab you are visiting may be able to offer advice. Rothman adds, “If you are going to a country where you don't speak the language, try to find a bilingual school. The one our kids went to had a lot of visiting students, and knew how to give them a positive experience.”

If you've been a tourist in the country where you are moving, working there will be less romantic and more realistic, but also more rewarding. Rothman says, “Living in a place is a very different experience from falling in love with it as a tourist, because you're dealing with day-to-day life. But that's one of the reasons to do it, to experience the real life of another culture.” Küster-Schöck had traveled in the United States as a student but said, “living there required ‘adult’ skills, like renting a house, paying taxes, opening a bank account, and getting insurance. Finding new friends is hard work, and not any easier if you don't know the unwritten social rules in the new place. But we did find some very good friends.”

LIFE AS A FOREIGNER

To get the most out of your time abroad, explore your new culture and see the sights. This doesn't necessarily mean traveling, though. It might mean just going out the front door. Eisenman says, “Japan had all these places we had always wanted to see, but in the end, we thought, ‘why live out of suitcases when we have this great place in Tokyo?’ By staying in our neighborhood, we got to know the people and the shops in our area, and saw what life on our street was like.”

Chris Nomura also recommends diving into your new country, and welcoming the everyday surprises. He did a postdoc at the RIKEN Institute in Tokyo after getting a Ph.D from Penn State University. “Enjoy the cultural differences,” he advises. As a fourth-generation Japanese American who had never been to Japan, he confronted a special set of these differences. “Most

people assumed that I was Japanese, so when I told people, like train conductors, that I couldn't read a map, they would shake their head and say something like, ‘kids these days...!’” Still, he says, “You should try to learn the language. Even though my Japanese was less than stellar, just trying was appreciated.”

Eisenman agrees. “Whenever I said something in Japanese, they'd laugh and I'd think I'd said something wrong, but then I realized they were laughing because they were surprised and pleased.” Still, foreign scientists should be prepared for daily miscommunications. Eisenman says that misunderstandings occurred all the time, whether he was trying out his Japanese, or speaking in English, even though, in theory, everyone in the department he was visiting spoke English. “Sometimes I'd be talking to someone, thinking we were on the same page, but we weren't even in the same book!” he says.

STAYING IN TOUCH, AND GETTING AWAY

On the other hand, talking with colleagues at home was “almost too easy,” says Eisenman. Global connectedness means professors on sabbatical can have daily contact with their lab, but may never truly get away. “Lab supervision was all by e-mail and Skype,” he says. “Actually, 30 percent of my time in Tokyo was spent working on stuff for my lab in Seattle. People on sabbatical in my lab also say they spend a lot of time working on projects from home.”

Kate Jackson also uses the reach of the Internet to connect with her research group. It is in the Republic of Congo, while her faculty office is in the United States. Jackson studies the amphibians and reptiles of Central Africa, so for her, sabbaticals abroad are absolutely necessary. Her multiple trips to the Congo are both inspiring and alarming to traveling scientists.

From Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, Jackson supervises herpetology graduate students at the Université Marien-Ngouabi in Brazzaville, Congo. Like Eisenman, she uses e-mail and Skype to keep in touch, long-distance. Fortunately, “the students can do a lot on their own,” she says, and they'll need to. Jackson was slowed by malaria in 2008, and in 2009, she suffered spinal cord damage from “a virus I picked up in the Congo.” She's currently working with a physical therapist so she can return to her Congolese group in summer 2010. This is only the latest hurdle she has overcome in doing research abroad. “How do I manage? By making every mistake possible,” she says, “from mundane things like not having a specimen-collecting permit, to having to be evacuated by medical transport with a badly infected wound, to being bitten by a cobra. There was also a civil war once.” Still, her advice is to persevere, because “it always seems to work in the end.”

And it's absolutely worth it, she says. If you are interested in doing field science in a remote area, she says, “Just go there, that's how I learned.” Like Jackson, you might make a connection that brings you back. She says, “I went for the animals, and didn't expect to have any interest in the people, but now I feel like I'm needed by the animals *and* by the people.”

Even if you are not looking for an Indiana Jones experience, a sabbatical or postdoc overseas can be an adventure. **continued »**

POSTDOC 2: SABBATICALS ABROAD



"We never really discussed going back, although sometimes during the winter, we question our choice."

— Gianni Panagiotou

Living in a new country, whether in an actual or an urban jungle, takes courage and persistence. "Doing a postdoc is hard work wherever you do it," says Küster-Schöck. "You will be a newcomer to the lab, the institution, and maybe the field and techniques. Throw in a new city, country, and culture, and it can be pretty tough. But, as clichéd as it may sound, getting through that can be one of the best learning experiences of your life."

COMING HOME...

Postdocs who want to return to their home country can easily apply for jobs online, although interviewing takes a little advance planning. From his postdoc in Japan, Nomura found a faculty position in the United States, at the State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry. "I either went to interviews in the United States after attending a conference there, or was flown out by the university to interview," he says. "I do believe, though, that it is extremely difficult to get an interview in the United States if you are based overseas, unless you have something that your employer really wants." In general, though, overseas applicants are not at a disadvantage. Rothman says, "Having run faculty searches for many years here at UCSB, I don't think it matters where you are coming from."

That said, Rothman notes that working in England meant he missed out on some practical training about US science that he would have gotten at an American university, like how to write an effective US grant application, and how graduate students are funded. However, he says, "That was far outweighed by the richness of my experience as a postdoc."

...OR NOT COMING HOME

Especially for postdocs, a temporary move can turn permanent. Nomura met his wife in Japan, and says he would have stayed for the right job opportunity. After doing postdoctoral fellowships in the United States, Küster-Schöck and her husband expected to go back to Germany, but instead went to McGill University in Canada, where he got a faculty position, and she did a second postdoc before becoming manager of the university's proteomics and genomics facilities. This meant another international move, this time with a baby, but Küster-Schöck is now settled into her second new home. "At this point, I would probably have trouble fitting in, in Germany," she says.

No one has embraced a new country as thoroughly as **Gianni Panagiotou**, who visited the Danish Technical University (DTU)

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Danish Technical University
www.dtu.dk/English.aspx

MIT
www.mit.edu

European Institute of
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Fred Hutchinson
Cancer Research
www.fhcrc.org

State University of New York
www.suny.edu

McGill University
www.mcgill.ca

Université Marien-Ngouabi
www.univ-mngb.net (in French)

Medical Research Council
www.mrc.ac.uk

University of Tokyo
www.u-tokyo.ac.jp

as a Ph.D. student from the National Technical University of Athens, Greece. Originally attracted by the state-of-the-art laboratory facilities, he found that Scandinavia suited him, and he stayed for his postdoc. He is now an associate professor at DTU, where his girlfriend, **Irene Kouskoumvekaki**, is an assistant professor. She is also from Greece, although the couple first met in Denmark. "We never really discussed going back," says Panagiotou, "although sometimes during the winter, we question our choice." To adapt to a new land, Kouskoumvekaki says, "Don't judge things in the new country based on where you came from. It's a new situation and you can't make comparisons." Scientists moving temporarily abroad may be tempted to stay, advises Panagiotou, so just in case, "have a big party with all your friends and family before you leave."

CREATIVE BENEFITS

No matter where you end up, working abroad may have subtle scientific and personal benefits. Researchers at Northwestern University in the United States and INSEAD (European Institute of Business Administration) business school in France found that people who had lived abroad and successfully adapted to the foreign culture showed enhanced creativity in problem solving. Returning postdocs and sabbatical professors may find that overcoming the challenge of living in a new society ends up boosting their creative skills, inside and outside of the lab. "Working in another country gives you ideas and experiences that you can't get by staying in one place," says Kouskoumvekaki. Some things will be stressful, she notes, but "the excitement is bigger than any of the negatives, so just go for it."

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