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## Tales from trailing husbands

By Alicia Clegg



Down with the kids: husbands who take on responsibility at home while overseas can feel isolated

It is Friday lunchtime. Inside Le Baron, a bar on the outskirts of Brussels, George from Canada and Henri from South Africa are setting the world to rights over cappuccino and Jupiler beer. Among their companions the talk is of iPhones, golf and Prince Harry. Welcome to Spouses Trailing Under Duress Successfully, an expatriate network-cum-social club for men who follow their wives on overseas postings, otherwise known as Studs.

Once a rarity, women now comprise 23 per cent of workers on overseas assignments according to the latest report from US-based Brookfield Global Relocation Services. But while many international cities have long-established clubs for expat wives, the social needs of accompanying husbands have traditionally been overlooked. Studs aims to change that, creating a space in which businessmen-turned-stay-at-home-spouses can swap war stories and indulge in some man talk.

The group began in the mid-1990s, when Brussels's expatriate population was expanding. Groups of trailing males can also be found, from Switzerland to China. Eric Johnson, co-organiser of Shanghai-based Guy Tai – a play on *taitai*, Chinese for “lady who lunches” – says he knows of trailing male groups in the early stages in Beijing, Hong Kong and Zurich. “As [expat spouses] move on to other cities, they start to form local groups. Someone knows someone else and they say, ‘let’s do things together’.”

Michael Shevlin, a British national, put his career as an animator on hold to look after his two toddlers when his wife had a chance to work in Geneva. As the only man in weekday playgrounds, he hankered for weekends when he could push his kids on the swings without feeling “judged”, he says: “There’s a certain look that [says] ‘why aren’t you at work?’”

He hoped the expat mothers whom he overheard arranging coffee dates around their offspring’s play dates would invite him into their circle. But the invitations never came. Instead, with the help of Catherine Nelson-Pollard, an expat blogger and broadcaster, who knew of other expat husbands scattered across the region, he set up a trailing spouse group for men. Two years on, the group still meets in a microbrewery in Nyon, pulling in trailing males from nearby Geneva, Lausanne and across the French border.

### Starting a men’s group

- **Look for clever locations.** Meeting in centrally situated Nyon, rather than Geneva or Lausanne, allows Michael Shevlin’s group to pull in trailing males from both cities.
- **Keep to the same day,** time and place, so people don’t get confused. Fit around school runs and office hours so that working wives can relieve stay-at-home dads.
- **Publicise meetings through expat forums,** establish an email list and do not assume everyone is on Facebook or Twitter. Many older spouses aren’t (yet)
- **Offer something extra.** Guy Tai and the Nyon group both meet in microbreweries with unusual ales. Le Baron overlooks a popular farmer’s market selling cheese, fish and patisserie. It also sells fresh flowers – “handy if you’re in the doghouse” at home, says Kevin Anderson.

In an alien environment, says Yvonne McNulty, author of *Managing Expatriates: A return on investment approach*, people seek out others with whom “they might have something in common”. This puts trailing husbands, who will typically be far outnumbered by trailing wives, at an immediate disadvantage. “When it turns out that you’re the stay-at-home and your wife has the big career . . . people can feel awkward because they don’t quite know where you fit in.”

Differences between gender roles today and the norms with which people grew up create other problems, says David Schiesher, a Geneva-based psychotherapist, recalling a couple who consulted him. The wife’s job involved repeated overseas postings, hindering the husband’s career. He became resentful and depressed; she thought he needed to make a bigger effort. “Even though she was comfortable being the provider, there was still this old programming that told her that he should be doing more.”

Mr Shevlin says meeting other men who had also come to Switzerland “on the back of their wives’ contracts” made his life less lonely. However, having sat in on a few gatherings of expat wives in which – on more than one occasion – a mother “going through hell” began crying, he thinks the emotional lows that both sexes go through are more on display when women get together.

Although some men will share their insecurities with peers, he says, others do not want to. Some become “ultra-blokey” when the conversation takes a personal turn, possibly to signal to the group that emotional matters are off-limits: “In a guys’ group you just wouldn’t see [tears].”

Likewise, Mr Johnson – a part-time international development consultant and stay-at-home father from the US, who is married to a corporate lawyer – says the emphasis at Guy Tai is on sharing local knowhow rather than giving each other overt emotional support: “Because we are

in a novel situation we spend a lot of time [helping each other] figure things out.” Subjects include bureaucracy or what air purifier to choose. Like the group in Nyon, Guy Tai meets in a microbrewery. It also organises sports activities, factory tours and lunches.

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Such groups can also help uprooted spouses restart careers. Mr Johnson says some Guy Tais have sidelines, but few look for regular employment. Settling in a family in China is a job in itself and opportunities for highly qualified westerners are scarce. By contrast, Mr Shevlin, who now teaches animation, says that among his group trailing spouses who find jobs act as a grapevine, providing tip-offs when employers are recruiting, for instance.

One risk with any expat spouse group is that members do not learn the local language or make friends and contacts outside the coterie. When you are newly arrived and know nobody, joining a ready-made buddy group may seem like “a cure for social isolation”, says Mr Schiesher, especially if you are the only male at the school-gate and rarely get the chance to talk to other men. He advises trailing males to look upon spouse groups as stepping stones to exploring local life.

This is the approach that Kevin Anderson, a retired high-school band director who followed his accountant wife from Texas to Brussels, has taken. When their radiators sprang a leak, Mr Anderson found an English-speaking plumber through Studs, but he is learning French and asks members to suggest cultural events, such as jazz festivals, to help him connect to the local scene.

As more women are posted abroad, some male spouse groups see opportunities to recruit members through HR departments, and thereby solve a problem for employers. When assignments go badly, one frequent explanation is that the family failed to adjust. Yet, according to research done for Lloyds TSB International, only 10 per cent of expat employers provide networking opportunities for spouses. “My impression is that employers like [us] because if spouses feel comfortable, employees are more likely to be happy,” says Mr Johnson, adding that Guy Tai has a flyer that relocation agencies and employers are starting to give to newly arrived female staff.

Alan Welch, a former British naval officer who joined Studs when his wife's career took them to Brussels, thinks employers would do better to publicise groups such as Guy Tai and Studs than host socials of their own. “[At your spouse's workplace], you need to keep in mind to whom you're talking . . . with a group like Studs it's more like meeting [friends] in the pub – and you're not relying on your wife for a social life,” he says.

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