

Health and Fitness Tips for Living Abroad

The decision to teach ESL overseas can be a significant one filled with excitement, promise and adventure. It also offers a personal challenge to many, as leaving home to travel 10 000 kilometers around the world to a foreign land can be a very frightening proposition. While there is no one way to eliminate the possible feelings of anxiety and stress associated with such a life changing experience, there are ways to manage them, so that your time overseas will be a fulfilling one.

The most important advice I can pass on is to stay active. Find some type of physical activity that you enjoy doing and do it regularly. Regular exercise not only keeps your body physically fit, but also keeps your mind sharp. Being so far from home, home-sickness and depression sometimes take hold, and lead to a potentially miserable experience. Exercising at regular intervals will raise your confidence and self-esteem and keep away most negative feelings. Exercising with a friend is also a great idea, as you can motivate each other.

Exercising can be as simple as going for a brisk walk or involved as getting a membership at a local gym. Often, even the smallest towns have fitness facilities of some type; whether swimming pools or martial arts studios. During my stay in the Republic of Korea (ROK) I had a membership at a local gym, took regular Kung Fu classes, ran regularly and swam on occasion. I had a positive outlook on the entire experience and rarely dealt with any feelings of anxiety or stress.

Another benefit of regular exercise is decompression. Life in certain Asian societies can seem very hectic, fast paced, crowded and chaotic at times, compared to North America. For those of us from the West who are suddenly immersed in this type of culture it can be quite a shock and the stress levels can mount quickly. Being able to get away from it all, even for an hour a day, and focus on your own health and well-being is essential to your success overseas.

While working in the ROK I found it necessary to devote some time every week to just being alone physically and mentally. I would often go for long walks in the country side early in the morning to get away from it all. I always came back refreshed, clear headed and in a positive frame of mind. Take some quiet time for your self, the benefits are real.

On that note, before traveling overseas to work, know where you're going. Will you be working in a city of ten million or a town of thirty thousand? What are you more comfortable with? Where did you grow up and what are you used to? Every area has its pros and cons, however, many negatives will be magnified in a large city. Air pollution, noise pollution and crowded conditions all conspire against the health of those living in the larger Asian cities. My advice would be to avoid the mega-cities if at all possible.

Being so far away from home for the first time can be an invitation to disaster if you aren't careful. You will meet people from around the world, all with different backgrounds and experiences. Some will be good, others will be bad. You will also have a lot of money in your pockets, perhaps for the first time. Regardless of the country, illegal drugs abound, and in some countries illegal drugs are considered equal to murder. Not convinced? Watch the movies *Midnight Express* or *Brokedown Palace*, they hit the mark. Unless you are willing to pay dearly for a momentary pleasure, stay away from all drug activity and those who partake in it. Just by being with a group of people doing drugs you're guilty by association, plus the fact that drugs offer you nothing in the form of real relaxation and stress relief. Regular exercise and proper diet are the best alternatives.

In most Asian countries cigarettes and alcohol are fairly inexpensive. For example, a \$12.00 pack of cigarettes in Canada would cost roughly \$2.00 in South Korea. If you don't smoke already, don't use this as an excuse to start. The same goes with alcohol, if you must drink do so in moderation, but remember that alcohol impairs judgment and you don't want to find yourself in a potentially dangerous situation thousands of miles from home. Coffee is very popular in some Asian countries, so if you drink it, also do so in moderation. Caffeine provides you with no real

health benefits. I would suggest simply drinking bottled water. You'll appreciate it during the muggy Asian summer months and you'll be giving your body something it needs anyway.

As part of your lifestyle get plenty of rest and sleep. Avoid late night parties as they become easier when you're working late afternoons and evenings only and have the mornings free. Sleep well at night and use your free time to do something active as mentioned above. Don't let yourself turn into a couch potato; this will affect your mental outlook as well as your physical condition.

Indulge your palate when living overseas. Try all the local cuisine and forget about your North American diet. Asian cooking is much healthier than the foods we have typically become accustomed to here in the West. An overall focus on fresh fruits and vegetables, soups, steamed rice, light sauces, fish and small amounts of meat make Eastern cooking low calorie, low fat and nutritious. Although all the fast food outlets are available, avoid them. Did you travel half way around the world to eat a grease laden Big Mac? If you stick to the local cuisine you will lose inches around your midsection in a very short period of time, without even trying. Add regular exercise to the mix and you have a real recipe for success.

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