Practicing Law Abroad: The Expat Files

Corruption, fishnet stockings, downing baijiu shots with partners—it’s all part of practicing in a foreign land. Meet five lawyers and their adopted jurisdictions.

Most young lawyers spend so much time and energy establishing themselves in the United States—going to law school, finding a job, passing the bar, learning how to practice—that working abroad remains a wonderful, mysterious experience only other people have. But the fact is that firms often feel lucky when lawyers volunteer for an international stint. And now that the globe is so tightly wound in fiber-optic cable, conducting business across oceans has never been easier. But for the time difference, an attorney could be toiling in Boston just as easily as she could be in—well, Sydney, for example, where one of the lawyers profiled in this story works. Or Shanghai, Moscow, Paris, or Sao Paulo, where the other four live. Talk to a partner or recruiting director to find out what the possibilities are at your firm, and you may soon find yourself packing up your suits and brushing up on your Portuguese. As you’re about to find out, the only obstacle between you and a life-changing international adventure may be a plane trip. So, please turn off all portable electronic devices and make sure your seat back and tray table are in their upright and locked positions. We’re ready for takeoff.

Paris Rachel Thorn Age 33 This might sound corny, but my favorite thing here is the Eiffel Tower. It’s between my office and my apartment, so I walk past it all the time, and I drive by it if I take a cab home. In the course of my work, sometimes I can forget that I’m in Paris. But then I look up at the Eiffel Tower and it reminds me I’m here.

I practice international arbitration with Latham & Watkins. When the firm merged with the French practice of a Dutch firm two years ago, the co-chair of the group in New York decided to move here. Since I worked mostly with him, he asked me if I’d relocate. I came with my husband, and I’m one year into a three-year stint.

One of the first things that struck me when I arrived is the extent to which the French are more fashion-forward than Americans. Parisian women seem to take greater pains with their appearance. More attention is paid to the fact that you are a woman. I’ve seen fishnet stockings paired with a conservative skirt during the day. I bought a suit here recently that was by a French designer, and the cut is much closer than anything I would have worn in the Unites States. Women wear heels everywhere—I haven’t taken to this yet. In fact, when I walk to work I get some strange looks for wearing running shoes with my business suit. I’ve tried to dress French, but frankly, I’m too preppy.

What I’ve come to appreciate is that the pace here reflects an appreciation for the quality of life. At a flower
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Outside work, social life in Moscow revolves around nightlife, mostly because of the weather. The winters are bitterly cold and there are months of darkness, so new bars and restaurants are constantly opening. Sometimes it seems like there's a different hot spot every week. But as a matter of fact, bowling—yes, bowling—is one of my favorite things to do here. It’s hugely popular, especially with the natives. It’s perceived as prestigious, so it’s expensive—about $35 an hour. But that includes the shoes.
Sydney Cindi Lefari Age 34 This office is small. There are six lawyers, three of whom are partners. We only practice U.S. law, primarily corporate matters like securities offerings and mergers and acquisitions. Mostly I advise clients seeking access to U.S. capital markets on corporate finance transactions. Right now, I’m representing an Australian company on an offering of debt securities in the United States. Most of the firm’s clients are Australian companies that want to do business in the United States.

My husband is Australian. We moved here before we were married because he was in the U.S. on a tourist visa and couldn’t work. We decided that if I was able to get a job in Sydney, we would come and stay a few years. I had been practicing corporate law in New York, and after several years I was ready to do something new.

The job market was very different in 2000—it was a good time to be looking. I called a headhunter in London who deals with Australian law firms, and I interviewed with what was then Winthrop Stimson (it merged with Pillsbury in 2001) and a couple of local firms. I got two offers. It all happened so fast—within three months I had accepted an offer, and we moved in December 2000.

The work volume here is less than what it would be in New York, and lawyers have more responsibility on a wider variety of projects because there’s not as much of a hierarchy. In New York, there are many more junior associates staffing various deals. In this office, we all do everything. At first, I was the only associate here, which kept me incredibly busy. But while I was on maternity leave a few months ago, the firm hired another associate—who, fortunately, we’ve kept on—and upon my return, they hired a third. The long nights are far less frequent than they would be in New York, too. Overall, there’s a healthy balance between work and family. My office overlooks Sydney Harbor and has spectacular views of the opera house and the bridge. I have lunch almost every day with my husband and my daughter, and in the summer we sit out by the water.

Sao Paulo Miguel Lawson Age 37 My freshman year of college, I took a course on the history of Brazil, and it changed my life. I decided to study Portuguese, and I took class after class on Latin American history. I spent a semester studying in Salvador, a city in northeastern Brazil. I have no Latin ancestry, no family ties to Brazil. But I feel I was meant to live here. It’s hard to explain, but I felt a connection to the people. Still, it took me more than a decade to come back after that semester. In 1997 I was doing energy-related regulatory work for a firm in Washington, D.C. An old friend who was living in Brazil came to visit. Talking to him helped me realize what I was missing.

There weren’t many U.S.-based firms in Brazil then. Headhunters laughed when I told them what I wanted. I was close to giving up when I got a call from a headhunter telling me that White & Case was looking for American lawyers to staff an office here. Within a couple of months, I moved.

As a corporate lawyer, I handle transactions in project finance, capital markets, equity, and investments. Many of the firm’s deals play a role in Brazil’s development—the firm has assisted multilateral agencies in structuring financing for an expansion of the Sao Paulo metro system and for a new electric power plant, for example. Our office consists of six lawyers, four of whom are from the U.S. We generally do what we’d do in the United States, but it’s important to have attorneys who speak the language close to our clients, so we’re here. Brazil is a country of insiders—to a certain extent, who you know determines how well you do. Getting your foot in the door is hard, but once you’re in, if you do a good job there’s strong client loyalty.

At this point, I don’t know where else I’d live. This is my home. I’m not oblivious to the crime, the pollution, the poverty, the hunger, the corruption, or the lack of infrastructure. For tourists, it’s easy to look beyond these problems; I don’t have that luxury. At times, I get frustrated or sad. I get angry. But Brazil is a country that embraces everyone, and because of this, people who come here end up embracing it back.