

# Before Canada

Planning to immigrate into Canada

Simon Crossley

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# 1

Yesterday (mid-July 2006), I collected the Visas for the three of us. The Canadian High Commission made us wait outside for about 20 minutes in the unrelenting heat. The queue was a diverse and representative as they get. The physical process of getting to the visas in the building was harder than at an airport: lots of doors, and stairs.

The mobile phone had to be switched off and locked away. Myself and my bag went through a metal detector check. There was no ceremony upon receipt of the passports with the visas just a curt warning - check everything on the forms is correct now as afterwards will be too late. I almost did not want to leave the building in fear of spotting something at home. So I questioned every pathetic inconsistency between our three forms. Unable to find an error I left the quiet dullness of the Commission for the hot sticky smog of London.

I let my wife know and she is strangely unmoved, almost not wanting to know. I feel strangely dislodged but carry on.

I have had an email from someone I last knew from when I was 10 years old - so I had forgotten about her to all intents and purposes. So there I was about to collect my visas to emigrate and live in Canada when I receive an unexpected email from someone from my childhood who is now living in Canada. She emigrated when she was sixteen and is making her first trip back to Blackpool. It has added a small new dimension to the journey, since I just don't know anyone out there on my side of the family to talk about life out there.

There is a long list of jobs to do and matters to contemplate before leaving home. The dining room is becoming a staging post for unwanted articles on their way to a good home: clothes, books etc. I have updated my CV ready to face a new challenge in my career. An estate agent - the utterly affable Paul Sherriff of Sherriff and Mountford. He observes that one in ten of the homes he visits are upping sticks and venturing to new shores, albeit not usually Canada. More typically, Spain and Australasia. It is slightly disturbing to think that so many more people than one would expect are leaving the motherland.

Sitting in the living room I look at the jobs to do: sell the house, find a home for the tropical fish, sell the two cars, inform my family, sell the two hi-fis, leave my job, sell the cabinet my father gave me [my brother thankfully agrees to take this and keep it in the family]. Luckily Harry is too young to dispute some of the decisions that will be made about which toys he can take with him. He is a seasoned traveller at 17 months having been on an aeroplane three times already, but I wonder how he will be once the penny drops and he realises he is not coming home. By the end of the year he will be talking and may start asking questions.

### 3

It has been a long road to get here. If we put our mind to it maybe the process of applying for emigration would have taken months not years. For us it took four years. The starting point was the very speculative test of seeing if we could rustle up enough points to be accepted. This is where a little education with certificates helps. The entry point was set very high for us having no other means of breaking into the country - no family, no job.

The next stage was the first commitment of actually engaging an agent to process our application. This involved masses of paperwork collection and documents to read and complete. This was the first major test for us as we could always easily back out but we could also be rejected. Having passed that we then had to progress to the next stage of a medical and processing forms for the visa. However, we found that life back home was causing a critical distraction for us. Firstly we tried - successfully - for a baby. Nine months of pregnancy and the upheaval of having a family took its toll on whether we wanted to continue with our application to emigrate to Canada. We both pursued our careers and, for my wife, this was a major step up and became a stressful challenge in balancing a home life, having a baby and a career.

Contemplating Canada at all for a while was not on our agenda. Also important in our lives was the loss of my father, whilst for my wife, her granddad continues to soldier on. She does not want to leave him having been so close to him as her last elder, but she has over time took the view that she can always emigrate to Canada on the condition she can come straight back if he became critically ill. There is also her career which took a massive upswing and consequently put Canada on hold. Since our wedding - birth, death, moving home, career - has all been a huge pressure on our marriage and kept Canada from being a decision we were ready to make.

We decide I will go out first to Canada. This has the practical benefit of allowing the house to sell and for me to concentrate on getting a job. It also means we will spend some time apart which we decide is probably a helpful move to put some space between us.

## 4

Judgment Day eventually had to arrive. We were faced with a final warning of picking up our application where we had left off or losing it and having to start from the beginning all over again - if we wanted to. To my surprise my wife decided she was in. Having Harry had altered her thinking about her career, her company had not treated her with the dignity and respect she thought she was deserving of, and Harry would have an education of a very high standard where we thinking of living. I had put a lot of time and effort in to the application to Canada but having seen it drag on it had lost its sheen. The initial enthusiasm for a future in Canada had been replaced by a home and career I was happy with. But this is one life and I had opted to spend the rest of it in Canada.

So why are you going? People ask. Well it all started about three years ago when we both agreed emigrating was a dream we shared but needed someone to do it with. I did not have a destination I was a comfortable with until Mandy took me on holiday to Canada and I realised that this somewhere I could call home. Everyone I have informed I am moving to Canada thinks the country has many virtues in being safe, friendly, affordable.

The first step was to find out if we had sufficient points to be eligible to apply. Surprisingly I did and not my wife, despite her working in management in the private sector. We found a reliable agent to process the application and slowly but surely we worked our way through all the paperwork and stages without any setbacks. So we continued whilst there was no challenges that stopped us.

## 5

Making such a huge and disruptive move was based on a number of factors at home needed to be addressed. Firstly Mandy and I were promoted, for Mandy it was a major career move. This meant that Canada would be on hold for a couple of years until our jobs became less important.

The second challenge was planning to have a baby before we left for Canada. Once Harry appeared on the scene we needed to allow a year for us to get used to Harry being around. All this procrastination had one outcome which was a deadline with our application. All the changes in our lives had to be reflected in our application causing more form filling.

The day came when we had to decide if we were to continue with or drop our application. Maybe if I was ten years younger the process of moving to another country would have been easier than it is today with a family and possession passed down from parents. The list is daunting and involves separation from many goods that are gifts and only need replacing because the voltage is different in Canada.

## 6

I don't let go of my possessions easily so I found myself having to make the hardest decisions of my life when it came to deciding what goes with me and what does not. Electrical items was straightforward due to the voltage, furniture was straightforward as we will start afresh. This enables me to get over that irrational attachment men appear to have with gadgets. But over time I have gathered so many small personal items of an emotional connection it is these that it is hard to make a decision over. Many carry memories and are our visible manifestation of our past. I have managed to hack at my book collection and music collection, and then other go through cupboards where games, candles and other miscellaneous baggage is collected. It is a major life event in being the only time we would ever have to have a clean sweep.

When looking around the house the list of possessions for disposal I divided them into groups: stuff that is worthy of going to charities, rubbish for the tip, furniture to pass on to family, and items for sale on to Ebay or local classifieds. Selling stuff actually demands much time and effort with packing and promoting over time. Some sell, some do not and alternative classifieds need to be found. Ten years ago I would not have had so many possessions. I did not have a son with more toys than even he is aware of. The toys cannot go because, for some bizarre reason they are too old for him to play with yet.

# 7

Closing down our life in the UK is the next stage: bank accounts, direct debits and utilities. The house is now on the market. The fish will need a good home. The cars need to be sold and the shed needs emptying. I am trying to keep attacking the list on a daily basis to minimise the jobs my wife will need to do after I have left.

In general people are shocked into silence and then respond positively wishing us well or taking an interest in our idea. Some feel the loss. Informing the two families, though, is an emotional and sensitive matter.

One of the hardest challenges to face head on with leaving England is informing friends and family we are leaving. Typically the response is positive, with some astonishment as the timescale is near and does not allow much for acclimatisation. Some people are pleased that we are pursuing a dream and bettering ourselves and our lives. Others are sad to lose us and could not imagine such a huge jump but wish us well. And then some others feel a deep sadness and loss as we are part of their lives and that gap can never be filled by anyone else. I hear from other people emigrating that some people simply cut them out as that is easiest and most practical way they can deal with the loss (or departure where there was never much of a bond). It is hard and painful to leave someone who needs you and will feel only hurt by your actions.

A more oblique challenge is giving up the small and trivial routines in my life that are a part of living here: listening to Radio 5 Live when I wake up and in the evening, watching my football team play, watching English comedy, having a curry once a week, going to local pub, and so it goes on. In Canada I will face a different kind of life without these cultural familiarities that structure and identify my life. I will miss them, possibly without realising it at first, then when I look for the gaps. The next challenge will be immerse myself in Canadian cultural traits that will fill those little gaps in my daily life.

This weekend was an opportunity to personally inform some of my close friends. As with family this involved a get together. Choosing the moment is tense work and as the day matures I am conscious of running out of time and leaving it to the last minute. Eventually I find a natural gap in the conversation and inform everyone I have an announcement. I chip in before the inevitable wisecrack about pregnancy and then break the news. This particular weekend has the additional slant that my friend has breast cancer and this is our first visit since we were informed. We would have visited anyway, it was not a dramatic hospital visit of any sort. I am conscious that we must not sideline her feelings but continue as normal having a lovely weekend. But there is nothing normal about this visit. Like others I feel a sense of ending, a true loss that will not cut deep into me until I am actually living my life in Canada. It is hard to express that loss when it has not happened yet.

All our friends though shocked at first, are now pleased for us. There are still a couple of months yet so the true sense of departure has not yet arrived. We are still busy selling everything that can be sold. The estate agent, Sherriff and Mountford, display all the characteristics of astute but bumbling bluffers. Never able to stick to one story or follow a request they keep pushing back the disappointing response with a review in a week's time. Whilst confident of selling the house they are nervous about getting that sale, and we are picking up their vibes.

We held a do at my sisters to say goodbye to my side of the family with a few close friends from Blackpool. This was low key and lacked the emotion and tears of the previous encounters when we made the announcement. It seemed everyone enjoyed the excuse for a get together and there was the risky but worthwhile mix of friends and family.

Everyone was pleased to catch up with each other and the event passed off in a slightly unreal manner, but we avoided any hullabaloo when we arranged it. It was almost as if we were not leaving. I had mentally prepared some kind words of thanks and this was not the end but the beginning but luckily I was not pushed by anyone to say anything. Personal words of good luck and well done for taking the risk were exchanged but no longing moments of loss. A few more bearhugs but no real sense of ending.

Perhaps it was because it was being avoided. Perhaps I am not the kind of person friends in general show much emotion towards. Since I am not leaving for over a month it does not feel like the end for me, just yet, as if there is still time to sneak in another visit - just as my sister has done. I was reminded that if I was a woman perhaps I would have hugged everyone for dear life, told them how much I will miss them and even cried. Instead I will write. Not until I am there in another world where I can't walk out of the door and visit friends will I feel it is for real.

We are having a leaving do at our home at the end of the month with local friends, after I have resigned from my job and only a week before I go. Maybe then I will feel it is a little bit real. It is hard to see beyond the sale - or lack of - the house. Once the ball has begun to roll on that can I begin to look forward. Nothing else is on the same scale. There are the cars to sell but the house sale is blinding me from anything else include my own departure.

Two weeks and counting and the sense of closure begins to take shape. We packed some of my stuff this weekend into groups - that which I take with me on the plane and that which will be shipped by airfreight ready for when I arrive so I have all I need. I started off by being frugal but the challenge for me is that the home I will be renting in Ottawa will be unfurnished so I am taking more than I originally planned and will need to do some basic shopping out there for mattresses and simple furniture. The dilemma is that there is a break before my wife intends to join me when I will have no furniture but I don't want to be sitting on the floor for three months.

Our contract with the bumbling estate agent Sherriff and Mountford ended today. Their signing off note was to call us about the last viewers with a desultory offer trumped up as "at least you have an offer." Well it isn't really because the viewers do not even have their house on the market yet. So we have a new estate agent to sign up tomorrow who we know will put some effort in to earning their fee.

It's my last full week at work and the demands keep flooding in. Any attempt at closure is becoming a distant dream; they have decided against recruiting from the last interview held so the team is nervous. I am trying to set up systems and leave handover notes so nothing is left to chance. The quarter has ended and colleagues are demanding information from me before I go, and they know they have to be nice about it.

What happened Next...? What did my wife then say to me....? Read "After Canada."