

Becoming a Journeyman: A rough guide to working abroad

Why work abroad? This question is unique to every individual and it is true that there are many benefits to taking the plunge. It could be a case that 'the grass is greener on the other side' or 'travel broadens the mind'. But whatever the case, the temptation as a British greenkeeper to stray from these shores is greater now than ever. Greenkeepers have been always been in demand and more so nowadays when turf professionals are a valuable commodity in many regions of the world where the knowledge to get a golf project off the ground is needed. This is especially true in emerging golf markets or in cases where demand outstrips the capacity of local personnel.



Many believe that their profession is more valued outside the UK and so can be a part of the on-going debate regarding the perception of 'greenkeeping' within the golf industry. In terms of new courses on the Continent, in most cases they are enterprise owned, operated or run by astute businessmen and managed by a professional team of specialists who may come from a wide range of business disciplines. For example, if it is a resort scenario, a Course Manager/Superintendent may ultimately answer to a General Manager, who comes from a construction background or Resort/Hotel Manager who has worldwide experience of the hospitality industry. Each will have a specialist knowledge and training and rely upon your knowledge completely to set the golf section on its feet.

In some cases the owner of the company, or financial backer, has autonomous control of the project. Enter such ventures with caution. Multi-millionaires can have difficult personalities. It is also true that the Continent is not as 'foreign' as it used to be. A generation ago going on holiday to Spain and the Mediterranean was seen as positively exotic. Now the annual invasion of Brits abroad has changed our perception of the Continent and our involvement with our European partners.

So what makes someone pack-up everything and dare to work abroad, the foreigner in an alien land? Maybe an adventurous spirit or blind faith to think that anything is possible? Perhaps the key word is 'change'. Some people love the buzz that comes from it. A sense of adventure helps and an absolute trust in your convictions is required.

Gaining knowledge on where to look for employment abroad can be done in several ways. Today, Europe has a more integrated approach on this subject and there are several agencies that handle enquiries regarding overseas positions. Greenkeeper International often advertises positions abroad for every level of experience but still the most productive way to source vacancies is through building up a network of contacts.

Potential employers may use a different approach to find the key personnel for a project. They may rely on individuals who bring services to the business from outside greenkeeping to assist in the search. Obvious contacts to pursue may include house designers, construction specialists, consultants and machinery manufacturers that may be dealing with new projects. The wider the net of contacts you have with people outside the country, the better informed you will be of vacancies abroad.

Another method is to establish yourself in the part of the world in which you wish to live and work. This invariably carries more risk and might only be possible if there are no visa restrictions that prevent you from becoming domiciled. But it has reaped rewards in the past and can impress employers as to the level of your determination.

If you are successful in reaching the interview stage, here are a few hints to take it to the next round.

- Do homework on the company, surf the net, research the company's background and, if possible, gain details of their financial accounts. Perhaps both home and away interviews will be arranged, as part of a first phase screening and a second interview abroad. I would stress that it is important to see the site, even if it is in a pre-build stage. Try to understand the geography of the land and what the finished product will look like.
- If possible, spend a weekend with your partner, if you have one, just to get to know the area. Meeting future employers in their own environment also gives

you a better impression of how they react in a working capacity and an understanding on how the company functions.

- Ask what would be the most likely town in which you'd live. Visit the place and get an idea of amenities that are available. What are the prices in the supermarkets? If you have children, are the schools in the area of good standard? Healthcare provision is very important, especially if it is likely that you could have children while abroad.
- What are house prices like, could you afford to purchase or rent in the area? Are prices liable to increase or drop in the future? You must address the situation not as a tourist but as someone who would be living and working there.
- Look at the business objectively: Do the owners/operators of the project show vision and good business acumen in planning a golf course in the location in question? Or could the concept become a 'white elephant' quite rapidly?

I believe you have to look at all angles of the proposal to an extreme, taking into account the political stability of the country you would be entering. The Foreign Office in London is a good source of help.

The contract and how it is negotiated is a big part of how life will be shaped during your working time with the new employer. Here are a few pointers:

The size and complexity of the course will greatly shape the package you will be offered. The title may be stretched to include other responsibilities. As a department head, you may well be involved with the clubhouse to a greater extent than you intended. Crossover activities may mean you have a large garden staff or control of other departments. Overseas salaries may look very inviting to the first timer but working hours and the commitment needed to earn that salary can be more extensive. If you are in a pool of candidates, try to research what your equivalent peers would be earning in the local market.

Be aware if the intended employer asks you to contract your services to them, to set up as a one man private company. It is a way of avoiding tax on their behalf and could see you facing questions regarding the legitimate existence of such a company by the UK Inland Revenue or other authorities. Since September 11 2001, transfers of funds and working practices abroad have come under much closer scrutiny. Their request may also be an indication of how the company views the long-term employment of a foreign greenkeeper. Be cautious and take out the best legal advice from a British legal firm that you can.

Using a nett figure in dealing with salary discussions allows you to continue talking without having to deal directly with the tax issues of that country and puts the pressure on the prospective employer's accountant to gross up the figure. It will be important to use this tool to assess if the package is beneficial to you as you can directly relate it to your net earnings in the UK.

What may be offered to you may not be so attractive when you take out subsistence costs. Even in Europe, there are some vast differences. Accommodation may well be offered as part of the package. In some parts of the world it may be an essential where purchasing a property (or even renting) may be beyond the means of a turf professional. For example, if the proposed golf course is on an exclusive millionaires' resort.

The location of the accommodation may well be important to you in the future. If it is on the property near to the course then this may well mean that you are ideally located to commute to work, but it may have the disadvantage that you are always on call. Being housed in the same quarter/development as other staff members may also bring with it joys and woes.

Peter Bradburn provides useful pointers on what to consider when making the decision to work abroad.



Medical coverage is an important factor and should be given some priority. In some locations, medical insurance is compulsory for foreign workers and a valid policy is required. If the new company offers the policy, check out a copy of this before agreeing to it.

Relocation and initial travelling expenses in most cases are recognised as a necessity for a foreign worker but in the case of what to bring with you, bear in mind that rented accommodation usually comes furnished and whatever you take with you will have to be shipped on in the future.

For holiday provision try to negotiate the best deal for you. If you have built up extra leave entitlement with your previous employer, investigate if this current status is transferable. Also, if you were considering going farther a field than central Europe, would it be possible to have travelling days so the leave begins when you return to the UK? Pension companies will need to be informed of your change in circumstances and they will advise on how you can proceed while out of the country.

Your eventual move away from any future employer should be planned before you actually begin work with them. Have termination periods and conditions set out and acknowledged from the beginning. Have a grace period clause set in place so that accommodation and transport use is extended so you have the possibility to seek out prospects of other employment in the region. Have written into the contract that the company is bound to honour repatriation costs for you and your dependents.

A key element in this situation is what does the rest of your family do while you are embarking on this great adventure? If it is not well thought out, it can result in unhappiness for all parties. It is particularly important, if you have a partner, that everything is well thought through from their perspective.

Another key point is to have a fully validated contract from your new employer drawn up and signed by all parties before you leave your current employer. There have been nightmare situations where offers have been retracted. You will need to contact your tax office when you have committed yourself to leaving the country, as there is a process to complete. Towards the end of the first tax year abroad, they will ask you if you wish to pay a set figure for your National Insurance contributions. It is a decision that will affect your National Insurance credit basis in years to come.

There is a false idealism that Europe is now a Union of countries that allows the possibility for member state nationals to work within the community. The reality is that internal visa documentation does exist with most countries and that you will need to go through some official process. It may be prudent to take documentation about your past life, from school to health records. You will be amazed at some of the information authorities want to know.

Blending into a new community is part of the process of making your stay a good experience. One of the biggest mistakes the British make abroad is to develop the pack mentality, because it will not allow you to develop an understanding of the people in the country you are living in. Language will be a great stumbling block to overcome. Local TV can be bizarre and trashy to the extreme but the learning process of hearing the sounds of the words will assist in developing an understanding of the language. Picking up key phrases in the work place will help to get the ball rolling but a package of lessons will eventually be required.

Learning the nature and psyche of the nation's people may take you a lot longer to understand. For example, people in southern Mediterranean countries love to bellow and hammer out their views in a conversation. It is important to get a feel for how your adopted nation ticks. Winning over people will be a major accomplishment in the first season and will need dedication and a lot of one-to-one supervision.

The grow-in stage can be a fantastic time to be involved with the history of a golf course. The decision-making and implementation of management systems will affect the quality and development of a course well into the future.

And finally...An overseas experience does not always suit every individual. It really depends on the spirit of the person and how they can accept and deal with change. Patience and fortitude are two virtues that you will need or have to acquire very quickly to survive. It will be no holiday.

Other nationalities do things differently and may even defy commonsense to an outsider. It is a generalisation, to which I apologise to any European who may be reading, but the further south into the Mediterranean you venture the rate and speed of work tends to slow by several degrees.

The advantages of life abroad are there to be discovered, depending upon the chosen country and the individual. Yes the weather and temperature can be more desirable, the environment to work in challenging and the scenery beautiful beyond belief.

The downside of making the break may be less apparent than first thought. Distance from friends and family can test relationships to breaking point. As time passes, you may view all those things you once held dear, in terms of British society and the way of life, differently. Therefore going back after making the break may be much more difficult than you had thought.

But I can guarantee wherever you go in the world of golf, treating life as a journey across countries through work will be far more interesting than anything you have experienced before.

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