

# **A cultural transition. The different lifestyles of Cyprus and Australia and how the move between countries has impacted my life**

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Australia and Cyprus are two countries at the opposite ends of the earth, and the lifestyles of the two countries often seem to be of an entirely opposite nature. The two countries have evolved in different ways: where Cyprus has a deep Greek tradition, Australia is a new country with modern viewpoints; where Australians allow modernity to infiltrate their lifestyles, enjoy quiet nights at home, and value mateship, Cypriots are — in today's modern world — still highly traditional, prone to summer-long, all-night partying, and tend to value family over all else. While there may be more differences that could be placed on this list, tradition versus modernity, recreation, and loyalties provide a general overview as to the widespread differences between the two countries. The differences in these three areas will be broadly shown through the examples of wedding ceremonies, nightlife, and finally in the family togetherness that is often unseen in Australia.

Firstly, Australia is a very new country and it is only natural that whatever traditions it may have will not be as deeply embedded as the Greek Cypriot roots that largely derive from its mother country Greece. The wedding ceremonies in Australia and Cyprus will inevitably share some similarities: for instance the people of both countries will often choose to get married on the weekend. But where in Australia it is normal to open up the Sunday paper, turn to the wedding page and stare back at the many different strangers who have just wed, the Cypriot wedding announcement is nowhere near as informal. For example, if you are not aware of an upcoming engagement from the local gossip mill, then virtually every wedding in the local area will be made known to families because the parents of the bride and groom will usually stop by and personally invite you to the wedding — and this is how the three or four thousand guests who will be attending the wedding are invited to it!

Next, at the actual wedding ceremony, a huge difference is often apparent. Though Australians may still choose the traditional church to be married in, a great many will — without a second thought — choose to be married on the beach, at home, in a garden. But the Greek Cypriot marriage will almost always take place in a Greek Orthodox church, and the ceremony that young people undergo today is still the same one that their great-grandparents underwent — complete with *stefania* and the procession around the altar.<sup>1</sup>

Differences do persist and become immediately apparent to an outsider observing the events. And the resulting effect? In my opinion the warmth and intimacy created by a small, personalised Australian wedding is nowhere to be seen in the clone-like, auditorium-filled weddings which — like it or lump it — the Greek Cypriot seems to be forever stuck with.

Secondly, the young people of the two countries show a different pattern of night-time recreation. From my experience on both sides of the fence, the typical Aussie is happy to spend a quiet evening at home with a bunch of mates and a good movie. A loud night may consist of a pub crawl, or a club that closes at a reasonable hour. What to wear to these occasions? A top and jeans is what most people would choose to wear — and a girl may even add a little make-up.

A quiet evening in Cyprus: perhaps at a café or out for dinner. A loud evening may consist of all night-clubbing and/or pub crawling, followed by a beach session under the hot summer sun (sleeping at the beach is optional). What to wear to these occasions? Both quiet and loud evenings require a carefully chosen and accessorised, up-to-date outfit, with styled hair and — for the girls — a full face of make-up.

Some of these behaviours are clearly understandable: for one thing Cyprus' economy is based on tourism, so the need for a great many cafés, bars, clubs, shops, and restaurants is understandable. Australia, on the other hand, derives its income from a great many sources, with tourism being just one of these. Moreover, the tourists that do come will go to see the Great Barrier Reef or Uluru, so having and maintaining nightlife isn't as important as in Cyprus.

Also with, for instance, Melbourne's notorious four seasons in one day, many Australians may prefer a cosy lounge room to a chilly and cursory outing, while a Cypriot will enjoy their "summers [...with] days that couldn't die" (Seferis:3), by going to the beach by day, and going from night-spot to night-spot well into the morning hours.

Thirdly, there is no doubt that mateship is a key component of Australian life. Every weekend at the "footy" (Australian Rules football) there will no doubt be true blue Aussies with their meat pie and a cold beer, barracking for their beloved team. Otherwise they'll be at the pub, playing pool, matching each other schooner

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<sup>1</sup> *Stefania* refers to the two large connected rings that are used to bond the bride and groom during the traditional Greek Orthodox ceremony. The *stefania* are what officially marry the couple. The couple walk around the altar after this event — their first steps as man and wife.

for schooner. Readers of Australian literature will remember Phillip Gwynne's novel *Deadly, Unna?*, whereby mateship (developed through football) managed to break racial boundaries and strike up a friendship between the protagonist Gary Black, and his aboriginal friend Dumby Red.

And while Australians may get along well within their own families, they do not have the large, extended family that Cypriots have (thus also helping to explain their low number of wedding guests). And with — for instance — one sister living in Wagga Wagga and the other in Toorak, the family reunions that do take place every holiday can only reveal so much (with the negative bonding materials probably remaining hidden).

On the other hand, Cypriot families tend to live in close proximity to each other. My own mother's family are a family of nine siblings, and eight of them (plus grandma and grandpa) all live on the same street. The sisters meet daily for coffee, and the different families gather regularly for Sunday lunch or for someone's birthday or name day. The different cousins also live near each other, so they play together as kids, grow up together and create an unbreakable bond. As George Seferis puts it, "If someone is born the circle will widen / if someone dies the circle will shrink" (Seferis:79). In Cyprus family is everything, and, to give an example, my mother was the only one of her siblings to leave Cyprus for any extended period of time, and every phone call or letter that was exchanged in those twenty years included the words "when are you coming back". My elderly grandfather even flew over four times to see my mother, my brother and myself when we were living in Australia because the separation was too much for him to bear.

So, because blood is thicker than water, there is a tendency for Cypriots to feel a stronger connection with their family, and an assurance that someone will always be there. Australians may have great lifelong mates, but they may find themselves walking on eggshells with some issues because a single misunderstanding may spell the end of their friendship. As Seferis puts it, it is "easy [...] to please those friends who still remain loyal to us", but when "the ropes have broken" and "our friends have left us" (Seferis:4), an Australian may find himself disorientated and alone because friends may come and go but family is forever.

As for myself, I arrived in Cyprus in February 2004, roughly four and a half years ago. I was eighteen years old when my family made the move, had deferred my university offer, and had left my lifelong friends to enter "the boring village" as Greek poet C. P. Cavafy puts it. The following poem by Cavafy nicely summarises my initial reaction to the transition:

With no consideration, no pity, no shame,  
They have built walls around me, thick and high.  
And now I sit here feeling hopeless.  
I can't think of anything else: this fate gnaws my mind —  
because I had so much to do outside.

When they were building the walls, how could I not have  
 noticed!  
 But I never heard the builders, not a sound.  
 Imperceptibly they have closed me off from the outside  
 world. (Cavafy:3)

The above poem may have meant something different for Cavafy, but for me, this poem neatly shapes my initial reaction, leaving my life, friends, house and entertainments (and the city!), to be brought to a small village on a tiny island — one brimming with an enormous family that I didn't know, a language I barely understood, no social life, no home, not much of anything except an incredible bout of culture shock. *Sociology in a Changing World* by William Kornblum describes culture shock as “the feeling of disorientation and depression one experiences upon encountering a culture with norms and values markedly different from one's own” (Kornblum:113), and with some of the vast differences already mentioned, it is understandable that my initial reaction was such a shock that it came to overwhelm me.

But over time my reactions towards the island have changed. After a brief stint working in a hotel and at the University of Cyprus, I enrolled at the European University Cyprus (then Cyprus College) in the English Language and Literature programme. Living in the capital of Lefkosia, the university and the city have opened up a great many opportunities and experiences for me, ones that would never have been possible had I remained in the populated and highly competitive atmosphere of Australia. Aside from the entertainment and family togetherness that I have already mentioned, I have managed to do some travelling around Europe, won an all expenses paid Fulbright scholarship to attend a summer semester at Boston University, have worked as an English teacher and as a journalist for the *Cyprus Mail* newspaper — the third largest in Cyprus, and the biggest English newspaper in Cyprus — and the move has also opened up many opportunities for my future.

Firstly, since living at the European University Cyprus apartment buildings, I have shared a flat with African, French, English and Cypriot girls. Living with the African, French and English girls allowed me to experience different cultures and different ways of life that are not possible just by visiting a country. The French girl was so hospitable that I went to stay with her in her Paris apartment, and I enjoyed a two-week holiday in Paris, complete with tour guide and a local friend to tell me everything I needed to know about Paris.

Also, one of the biggest highlights of my stay was my all expenses paid, six-week Fulbright scholarship to Boston University. I attended summer classes at Boston University with seven other Greek Cypriots and eight Turkish Cypriots. On this trip I managed to see both Boston and New York and learn about the American college system, the American way of life and American culture, as well as learning about Turkish culture, and learning more about myself as a person and my capabilities.

The trip also had an added bonus. On our way back to Cyprus we had an eighteen-hour layover at Frankfurt airport. So, all the Greek Cypriot girls took advantage of this layover, and organised to go on a tour of Frankfurt. For a small fee, we were guided through Frankfurt and its winery areas. We saw castles, forests, vineyards, and other such German features. We also took a cruise down the Rhine, wandered around a small German village, ate lunch at a German pub, took a wine-tasting tour, went on a sky-lift and took in an aerial view of Frankfurt, along with other pleasant little surprises along the way. Overall, the entire summer was unforgettable.

Finally, one experience which would definitely not have come my way had I remained in Australia was my two-month stint as a TV journalist for the *Cyprus Mail* newspaper. As the regular TV journalist was going to be away for two months, I was asked if I would like to take his place for those two months. The journalist had become aware of me because of some film reviews that I sent by email to every newspaper thinking I had nothing to lose (and as it turns out I didn't!). During the two months, I had to do the TV listings for six free-to-air channels and two pay-TV channels, as well as filling in "Pick of the Day" panels by commenting on what I thought about certain TV shows and films that were to be shown. I had to complete one panel daily for the newspaper, and three to four for every day for the *Seven* magazine (which is released on Sundays and includes a full seven-day TV program listing). My job responsibilities were those of a regular journalist — no leeway was given for the fact that I was a newcomer. As a result I learned very fast, and the experience taught me a great many things about journalism, the staff and editors being very impressed by my ability to learn fast, and my aptitude for the work.

Overall, these experiences would never have happened had I remained in Australia. For one thing an all expenses paid trip is hard to come by in Australia, and when they do pop up the best of the best snap them up in an instant. Moreover, with Australia so far away from the rest of the world travelling is difficult, expensive and tiresome, and had I remained in Australia, I would have been lucky to have been able to afford just one of my many trips. Finally, as a high school student visiting the open day at Deakin University, I remember going to the journalism lecture and being told that the major newspapers — *The Herald Sun*, *The Age* — only take on about five new student journalists a year (from all of Victoria). As a result most finishing journalism students ended up working at local newspapers, hopefully managing to climb their way through the ruthless and highly competitive atmosphere and into a better position. I doubt that many Australian journalist students can say that they have worked as a fully fledged journalist while they were still in university.

So, despite all the ups and downs, my transition to Cyprus looks set to remain as a positive experience, one which has opened many more doors than it has closed. While I may still long for the company of my school friends and for my home town of Melbourne, I now realise that I have gained the company of a grand family, have discovered a great deal about different cultures, traditions and lifestyles, and have opened up many doors for both my near and distant future. Australians and Greek Cypriots

may differ in traditions, recreation habits and loyalties, but their differences have all helped me to discover that there are different possibilities available in life, and now I have a slight advantage over others in being able to recognise the different opportunities available from each of the cultures, and to grasp them whenever one comes my way.

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