

National Victoria [Melbourne after COVID](#)

# Brain gain: Half of Australian expats are back home, and they've brought their talents with them

By [Zach Hope](#)

March 27, 2021 – 11.00pm

Georgia Frances King never imagined she'd savour the early-morning screeching of suburban cockatoos. Yet here she is, on a sunrise-facing balcony, and the clamour in Melbourne's "big sky" sounds like soothing proof of home.

The literary agent and editor has been bouncing around with friends and family since coming home in November after three years in New York City.



Georgia Frances King is a literary agent and editor recently returned to Melbourne from New York.

She endured the first wave of COVID-19 that [overwhelmed the city's hospitals](#), infected neighbours and killed parents of her American friends.

British friends went back to Britain, French friends to France and "when the numbers started ticking up again, I thought, 'I think I'm going to sit the second wave out,'" she says.

"It wasn't a forced decision, but it was an easy decision."

She is one of more than [480,000 Australians who have returned](#) since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic – close to half the total number of Australians previously living abroad, according to estimates by Advance.org, a professional network for expats.

Many are now unexpectedly rediscovering – and relearning – their own evolving nation.

“Some of the Melbournisms like people planning a fair way ahead and even booking restaurants and things like that are all very different to Hong Kong,” says financial technology executive David Jenkins, who returned with his family in mid-2020 after 16 years in Asia.



Georgia Frances King on the steps of her Brooklyn apartment block. She's now back home in Melbourne.

“But I'd say probably the funniest thing is just communication. When you live in a place where English is the second or third language, you tend to be very efficient in the way that you speak. But when you come home to Australia, that actually sounds quite rude.

“I was in a [Melbourne] taxi and I just said, ‘turn left’. Normally, I would ask, ‘can you please take the next left?’ In Hong Kong, honestly, that would confuse a lot of people.”



David Jenkins with wife Fay and their daughter Amelia in a Richmond park. SIMON SCHLUTER

Mr Jenkins is among the 16 per cent of returned Australians now working remotely for their overseas employer, according to an Advance.org survey.

His wife, Fay, an architect, is among the 15 per cent planning to build their own business.

They returned because of the mounting civil unrest between [pro-China and pro-democracy forces in Hong Kong](#) rather than COVID-19. Melbourne, they decided, offered a more stable childhood for their three-year-old daughter, Amelia.

“Also the natural environment: The parks, the fact that she can run around and chase insects and things. She loves that,” Mr Jenkins says. “Every time I see her doing that, I think ‘we made the right decision’.”

They are in the 37 per cent who plan to stay in Australia permanently.

Advance.org’s focus groups with returned expats have turned up recurring themes about a changing Australia.

One of them is an “Americanisation” of politics and culture, chief executive Johanna Pitman says. Other people, particularly those returning from Asian countries, have suggested Australia has become more insular and inward-looking.

Ms Frances King, who spent a total of eight years in the United States, says: “I actually feel that Australia is realising the vision of its own potential, and people are proud of that.

“After spending so much time on our own shores, appreciating our own country and pouring talents into our local industries over the last year, we are prouder than ever to call Australia home.”

She is among those working remotely for their overseas employer, rising with the early-morning cockatoos to catch her team’s afternoons – unthinkable little more than a year ago in an industry coalesced around a few Manhattan blocks and steeped in a culture of face-to-face lunches and meetings.

In the evenings and weekends, she joins old friends, who in post-lockdown Melbourne, she has noticed, are more inclined to spend time in their immediate neighbourhood than in familiar haunts elsewhere in the city.

“At the same time, I feel that everyone is down for doing something different: ‘let’s go for a hike, or let’s see what comedy show is on tonight’,” Ms Frances King says.

“I feel people want hyper-local but also to explore scenes in Melbourne they realised they didn’t spend enough time at until it was all taken away from them.”

She is in the 35 per cent of survey respondents who intend to return abroad when COVID-19 is under control, although she concedes it may end up as a two-month farewell tour with friends.

Until then, Ms Frances King plans to squeeze everything from her home city.

“The thing that gets me is the space here,” she says. “In New York, all you can see is buildings on the horizon. What I feel is special about Melbourne is that big sky and those sunsets and sunrises we get that are absolutely spectacular.” Her parents in St Kilda even have a backyard.

Recruiters and experts interviewed by *The Sunday Age* say the influx of talented Australians has not offset [the number of skilled workers](#) who have either returned to their own countries or been prevented from arriving. But this means opportunities.

“I think the recovery is taking everyone by surprise, in the white-collar area in particular,” says Suzie McInerney, chief executive of Six Degrees Executive.

“In some cases, there are shallow pools anyway so definitely the war for talent is really hot at the moment.”

Ms Pitman, from Advance.org, says while previous studies have revealed a reluctance from some companies to take on returned Australians – one reason being a perceived lack of local networks – it is now “a really important time to snap up all this talent”.

Employer surveys from recruitment company Robert Half suggest 70 per cent of Australian businesses were willing to increase their initial salary offering to secure new candidates.

A further 70 per cent said they were planning to increase salaries for existing staff in the next year.

It is this, Australia’s promising job market, that became the final lever for London-based lawyers Andrew Jiang and Jess Welk to call time on a bleak and isolated northern hemisphere winter.



Jess Welk and Andrew Jiang have moved home to Melbourne permanently because of the COVID-19 crisis in the United Kingdom. SCOTT MCNAUGHTON

Mr Jiang’s secondment by his Australian firm was secure, but spiralling COVID-19 cases in the United Kingdom closed Ms Welk’s chances of ongoing contracts in her specialisation of property law.

“She was putting her feelers out in Australia for jobs and the feedback she was getting was a lot more positive than in London,” Mr Jiang says.

“This was about mid-December. At that time, we thought ‘it’s time to move back to Australia.’”

Ms Welk is among the 36 per cent of returned Australians who, according to the Advance.org survey, are working in a new job.

Ms Frances King has shared many beers and coffees comparing COVID-19 experiences with Melbourne friends. It was a tougher lockdown here, she says. New York City never enforced [a curfew or five-kilometre travel limit](#).

“But over there, [COVID-19] is very immediate and very much around you,” she says.

“That’s a big difference being back. You realise the mental struggle that a lot of Melburnians were having [in lockdown] versus, maybe, the more health-focused struggle in America.

“I’m very grateful to be home. I speak to friends in New York: ‘Guys, I actually saw a movie in a movie theatre the day. I send them photos of a bar I’m at. Australia really worked together to make this work.”

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