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Imaginary homeland

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Even until just 10 years ago, Bangalore was a serene, quiet city. The only foreigners you saw were the ones on Brigade Road and MG Road.

Most would be on their way to Mysore to take in the palace or swing by the Cauvery for some classic mahaseer (trout) fishing. Mahaseer fishing was a major draw and Jungle Lodges and Resorts was even featured in Sports Illustrated as the place to offer some of the world's best game fish.

It was just about the time when acronyms like TI, IBM and HP were overshadowing ones like HMT, ITI and HAL. The morning cry of the vegetable vendor on our streets of 'sopppppoo!' would slowly vanish to be replaced by posters screaming computer classes. Today, there are people from diverse nationalities — Ethiopians,

Germans, Irish, Hungarians, Brits, Nigerians, Americans, Danes, Malaysians, Canadians, Belgians, Israelis, Russians, French — who live here and have become part of the Bangalore culture. To them, Bangalore is one of the best Indian cities to live in.

Back in the 1980s and well into the 1990s, diplomats in Delhi gave the capital an exalted aura. But diplomats lead sheltered lives. Their tuna paste and cheese would arrive through the embassy.

But for most other foreigners, Bangalore has quickly become one of the best places to live: the weather is great, it's a small city that is easy to get around and has a delightfully relaxed atmosphere.

The Mercer Worldwide Quality of Living Survey for 2010 confirms this. It says that Bangalore is the top choice of foreigners in India when it comes to quality of life. What exactly is quality of life and what is the effect it has on people?

Quality of life is pegged on simple factors such as low crime rates, the standards for health, transport infrastructure, availability of consumer goods, rentals, schooling and recreation opportunities.

Quality of life is enhanced by the political stability and socio-economic conditions of the geography. And finally, it's a question of the weather, the distance between you and natural disasters and the lines drawn by state and society that define personal freedom.

It's become so that the expat population is now a critical component of Bangalore's workforce. You can't imagine Bangalore without them — and you can spot the freshly arrived as they clutch a copy of Fiona Caulfield's *Love Bangalore* under their arms and locate stores like Good Earth to satiate their appetite for all things Indian.

The slightly better settled ones haunt meetings of the Overseas Women's Club at the Leela or the ITC Windsor and are a part of the Bangalore Expatriate Club. Both the organisations — along with some commercial ones like Global Adjustments — help expats find their feet on the street: where to locate good doctors, which are the better schools, how to participate in charity work and how to attend 'Sex and the City' parties (okay, clean up your dirty mind, they are not what you imagine).

The ones who are completely at home can be found tucking into puliyogare rice, attending classical Carnatic music recitals and shopping at Russell Market to whip up salads with brinjal and broad beans. To them, this is the imaginary homeland they have been dreaming of.

But the one thing we constantly overlook about Bangalore and why expats find it comforting is the fact that the local population is literate and speaks English.

An Italian journalist, Ilaria Linetti, made a telling observation recently about Bangalore. Having been to various parts of the country she was astonished by the number of books being sold on the streets — many of them to do with computers and computer science. It's a reflection of what Bangalore wants to be.

Today, expats are not just sharing their knowledge of the world outside. They find Bangalore fertile enough to set up their own businesses and bring their cultures and training with them. Mariannick Halai has started a delightfully rustic creperie and boulangerie in Whitefield.

She has a wood fired oven built by her husband — who is of Indian origin — and bakes delicious baguettes and croissants.

On weekends her French restaurant opens for dinner, serving simple salad and crepes. Ione Binford, who is the CEO and co-founder of Read Ink, has settled in Bangalore's Indira Nagar with her husband Thomas Binford — a globally acknowledged researcher of image analysis and computer vision from Stanford — to create path breaking handwriting recognition software.

The Binfords have brought with them a style of research and development that is native to Silicon Valley.

While people like Mariannick Halai and Ione Binford actualise their dreams, they are restructuring and rearranging the very character of Bangalore. Can this be the start of a Bangalore that is genuinely global?

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