

**B**EING in Sierra Leone was an eye-opening experience for Malaysian Rocky Tan, who describes the situation there as frustrating while simultaneously enriching.

"Basic things such as electricity, water, roads and telecommunication facilities that we take for granted (in Malaysia) become obstacles that need to be faced in a Third World country like Sierra Leone," says Tan who is the CEO of a bank.

As for skills, Tan says that it is the basics that are needed here because the country is just recovering after many years of conflict.

Fortunately for him, living skills such as patience, adaptability and flexibility that he had already developed from his numerous other jobs, backed him up in Sierra Leone.

"Being malleable, an all-rounder and a jack of all trades is very useful in Sierra Leone because people move at a slower pace here," he says.

Tan, 44, says it is also important to communicate with the locals in a way that they are accustomed to.

Understanding the local lingo and interacting closely with them is a wise move, he says. Otherwise, what is required and what is eventually produced can be totally different.

"Overall, it is more about people management skills and getting things done amicably and at an acceptable pace without stressing yourself out," Tan concludes.

Tan is among the high number of Malaysians who have opted to walk a different path in life by choosing to live abroad. Possession of the spirit of adventure, fulfilment of dreams, to settle down and to take the opportunity to see more of the world are among the reasons cited for the move to work overseas.

Generally, Malaysians working abroad fall into two categories: the executive and non-executive talent. This also depends on the channels used to go abroad.

Yeap Jin-Soo, office manager of Korn/Ferry International, the world's largest executive-search consultancy, says it is difficult to pinpoint the number of Malaysians working abroad. But he estimates that the highest number would be in the United States.

# Finding their niche overseas

**Working abroad can no longer be considered glamorous as many Malaysians seek greener pastures, a better quality of life for their family or sometimes just a new challenge. Through e-mail, some Malaysians working in other countries share their experience with K.S. USHA DEVI**



**LEISURELY PURSUITS:** Chan loves the less hectic pace of life in Toronto which allows her to conduct part-time cake decorating classes.

in the late 80s and 90s were young, single people with no tertiary education and very little to lose in seeking opportunities abroad," Yeap says, adding that this is a similar profile for millions of immigrant workers all over the world including Filipinos, Indonesians, Indians and Pakistanis.

Many come from humble origins and choose to enter a country ill-

get their Green Card (in the US). Others apply to emigrate from their home countries.

The US, Canada, Singapore, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong are popular destinations for Malaysian workers.

The more traditional destinations, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, attract both executive and non-

from humble origins.

"At the end of the day, from whatever background they come from, they are migrant labour and would return or would like to return to the country periodically or eventually," says Yeap.

An example, says Yeap, would be "landed immigrants" in Australia who typically don't give up their passports: a sign that they may want to return some day.

Rosalind Chan returns to Malaysia once a year to conduct cake decorating classes and catch up with old friends and family members. Having lived first in London, England and then Toronto, Canada, she has been abroad for almost 26 years.

While the years have passed by, the Ipoh-born Chan still yearns for certain aspects of Malaysian culture.

"I miss the local food although we do have Malaysian chefs here and may get some authentic Malaysian cuisine but at a much higher price than back home. We also do not have the privilege of a holiday during Chinese New Year as Christmas is considered the festive season," says Chan.

However, she acknowledges that living and working abroad has helped to expand her knowledge of the world. The less hectic pace of life in Toronto also suits Chan who is married with three children.

Besides holding part-time cake decorating classes in the evening,

to taking risks

— May Maniam

around the world. Through her job, she gets the opportunity to travel around the world.

"This has expanded my vision and enriched the quality of my life. Overall, people in Toronto tend to be more focused on family life and believe in spending time with the family," she says.

Similarly, May Maniam has spent 23 years of her life abroad, first in London and then in the US after she got married. As CEO of a cultural and business journal, she finds her job in corporate American culture challenging and exciting.

"Of course, in the initial stages it was a struggle to assimilate into the hard nose American culture but once I identified with the system and culture, I found my talents being developed and channelled in new and unexpected ways," she says.

When May started eBridge Malaysia — a journal with the tagline of bringing the hearts and minds of America and Malaysia together — in 2002, she says her Malaysian heritage helped her in dealing with people.

"I used the softer but important skill of understanding and connecting with people beyond the professional level, instilling good teamwork attitude and team building to energise and motivate those around me," she says.

For May, working in the US allows her the freedom to take risks and to explore, test and challenge her talents in new ways.

"At home, I would have had to deal with disapproval from family members and the community who tend to be averse to taking risks," she says.

While she is happy building bridges between the two countries and visiting Malaysia at least three times a year, May, who is in her 40s, sees herself as a citizen of the world.

"I get to go to places I truly love such as Malaysia, America, South-East Asia and Europe. Having a lap-