

MAP DEVELOPERS EXCHANGE

Living abroad for a while

Some of you might know that Simon Dellenbach from the Gümligen office and Jon Curtis from the San Rafael office exchanged their lives for a year. But let's get back to the beginning.

It all started when they told their manager they wanted to work and live for a longer period in Switzerland and California as several other developers did before them.

As they had the same manager he introduced them to each other and it turned out to an exchange which started in May this year.

Our Swiss Times (OST) asked them a few questions about how they feel and how they managed it. Let's get their answers.

OST: When was the first time you thought about living/working abroad?

Simon: Working in another Autodesk office was a possibility since I joined in 2006, and was always very present: After my first few months, Philipp returned from Ottawa, then Walt joined us from Ithaca and later Freddy went to San Rafael.

With the newly created Map team and the Gümligen developers working more closely with the ones in North America, the wish for a year abroad became more prominent for me and my wife.

Jon: I've considered it for years – but it does seem to

get more intense when the Republican Party starts taking more control over the U.S. government. It has also become more likely since my wife and I started traveling overseas in the past 8 years, and we've grown more comfortable with life abroad. I was also familiar with Walt's year in Gümligen, so knew there might be a possibility that Autodesk would be open to the idea.

On our trip to Europe last



Simon and Melanie Dellenbach on the terrace of their home in San Rafael

year, we extended our vacation for two weeks, working in Gümligen. It was a chance to meet the people here as well as scout out whether we really wanted to consider a year's re-assignment.

OST: How did you know that each other thinks about it?

Simon: I knew from Freddy that Jon was interested in coming to Switzerland again (he was there for a month in summer 2011), but didn't pursue this further. As Kevin was our team's manager last

year and knew both our interests, Jon started a mail conversation in November and we exchanged ideas, but we had to wait February until the exchange was approved.

Jon: While we were in Gümligen last year, we asked around about whether

“We had a going-away party by our friends in California – but our visa approvals had taken longer than expected so by the time of the party we did not yet know if we were actually going.”

Basically, everyone agreed that we should do this, but before the hard numbers on the expected expenses for the

company were calculated, we couldn't do much else than bothering Kevin with inquiries.

Jon: Since the first contact was initiated by our boss, this was not a problem. Kevin was very supportive from the beginning.

The real struggle was getting all the information up the management chain, and then waiting several months for the decision to be made.

It was particularly difficult to be in limbo for several months – needing to make two sets of plans for the coming year, one if we stay in the U.S. and the other if we are in Europe for the next year. We had commitments to break – but had to wait for the decision. It was a very difficult period, and our starting date kept slipping later into the year.

Of course, even after Autodesk said yes, the uncertainty continued into the government processes. We actually had a going-away party by our friends in California – but our visa approvals had taken longer than expected so by the time of the party we did not yet know if we were actually going.

☞ Suite next page

OST: What did your manager Kevin say and was it hard to convince him?

Simon: The budget approval was the hardest thing that took most time and patience.

MAP DEVELOPER EXCHANGE (CONTINUED)

OST: How did Autodesk help you to make it happen?

Simon: The Global Mobility team at Autodesk initiated and handled most administrative tasks, like hiring a law firm to do all the visa related paperwork, health insurance, flight booking, introduction to the area etc. All our costs for the move were covered by Autodesk.

Jon: Autodesk, and the relocation experts it contracts with, have done an amazing job. This being only my second visa process (and the previous one – to APAC – failed), I was amazed by the amount of paperwork and procedures involved. I didn't realize it would be so complicated and expensive to set up an assignment like this in a country we are on such friendly terms with.

Many details we didn't even realize, have been considered and handled by the company: not only the visas and permits, but also taxes, insurance, moving, and acclimating to the new country.

OST: What's the difference in working (atmosphere, colleagues, ...) where you are now compared to where you are from?

Simon: The weather is always good in the summer and the office rooms have A/C (sometimes too much).

As we have single offices at CCS 3900 (Civic Center South 3900), I don't get to chat with my colleagues about

“My wife has wanted this perhaps even more than I. She loves learning languages, and is advancing much better than I at German”

all kinds of things as I used to in our 4-people-room in Gümliigen.

The office is currently being remodeled, so at

the end of this year, we might actually get to see each other every day! ;)

Jon: I think most computer



John Curtis and Mary Carol Winkler on a bike trip in Switzerland.

programmers have a lot in common no matter where we are from. Simon and I also exchanged offices and machines – which was easier since we are working on the same projects. And of course, I've been working remotely with the Gümliigen developers for years.

What is different is the language. While our business is conducted in English, most social conversations in the office are Swiss German – so even the small amount of High German I know, doesn't get me very far here. But they

are all amused when I attempt to say something in German, and sometimes (rarely) they even understand me.

Many of my co-workers have been very helpful in including us in their activities and introducing us to their countries and homes. We've already had great times seeing parts of southern Germany and around Bern.

OST: What's your experience so far from business perspective?

Simon: I've had great opportunities to teach Industry

familiar with. But we also have plans for me to spend some time working in their code-base later in the year.

I'm also preparing a series of Tech Forums that will enable us to spend some time sharing information with the entire group, about the code which has been primarily developed in California.

And of course just getting to know each other better will be a great help when I return to California next year. I'll have a much better sense of how to help the two offices work together more smoothly, not only in the different code bases, but also in the ways we do all the overhead, access to the servers, procedures for submitting code, etc. I've already got a few good ideas I'll be taking back to share with my San Rafael team.

OST: Coming from pure business to a more private environment because, as said before they exchanged their lives, meaning house, cars, bikes, friends, etc. but not spouses.

What was the reaction of your spouse (just in case it wasn't a joint decision/wish)?

Simon: Melanie was always interested in coming (we came together shortly after I started at Autodesk) and always preferred sunny California over chilly Canada.

Jon: My wife has wanted this perhaps even more than I. She loves learning languages, and is advancing much better than I at German.

☞ Suite next page

MAP DEVELOPER EXCHANGE (CONTINUED)

OST: Are they working now or had they planned a “sabbatical” anyway?

Simon: She quit her job as a Telemedical Assistant last summer and is now fully concentrating on Fashion Blogging, Shopping and Tribal Bellydance, for which the US of A and San Francisco are perfect! Check out <http://www.rubenesque.ch>

Jon: Mary Carol is a Massage Therapist, so we knew from the start that she would not be able to work here. She has turned her business over to a co-worker for the year and doesn't really expect to take it up when we return. So she has, in effect, retired. Her second love is gardening, but we have been unable to acquire a garden here for her to work with. She has a small balcony garden, but really misses just working with the earth. Instead, she has been devoting a lot of her time to learning German and planning our time off – playing Travel Agent for our cycling tours and vacations around Europe.

OST: How does it feel to live in each other's home?

Simon: It's great to have had already a home to come to when we got here. We got a few things here and there and see it as our home.

At first it felt a little strange to just seize Jon and Mary Carol's house, car, bike and friends.

Jon: Surprisingly, it has been harder than I expected. I'm experiencing the difference between being a tourist and being a resident. Tourists don't have to know things like how to take out the gar-

bage – and I'm amazed at how complicated it is here.

We're still adjusting to being without a car (quite a challenge for an American), and moving from our own home into a Swiss apartment – where you can only do laundry on one assigned day per week, and quiet hours start at 10. But it's been really nice to come to an already furnished home, complete with TV/Internet/Computer systems.

OST: Was it important for you to exchange with a European/American?

Simon: It wasn't originally planned as an exchange. We wanted to go to San Rafael anyways.

Jon: We had specifically decided on the Gümligen office mostly because of my pre-existing relationship with the team here. We also liked it because Switzerland is centrally located in Europe, making for an exciting year of touring from here. It reduces the amount of change we've had to make, and the stress those changes could bring for us.

OST: Would you have gone if your only option

was APAC?

Simon: Probably not, at least not for a whole year. Asia was not that compelling to us, the cultural difference felt too big, especially for my wife.

Jon: We had tried to do a one-month assignment in APAC a couple years ago, but Autodesk was unable to get a business visa because the period of the exchange was too close to the Beijing Olympics. I'd be glad to do a shorter exchange in Shanghai, as it provides equally exciting touring prospects, and the needs of our two offices to exchange knowledge is just as great. However, I'm not sure we'd be up for a full year of living where we cannot drink the water.

OST: What's your experience so far from a private perspective?

Simon: We love it here! We've met a lot of nice and interesting people and visited great places (and spent too much money doing those things).

I still haven't sorted through all the pictures I took so far.

Jon: I had hoped to adjust more comfortably by now.

But I still get nervous doing simple things like buying lunch. Almost every day, the sales people say something to me I don't understand, and I have to try and explain that I don't speak German. At the same time, I'm very happy to have found a couple choruses to sing with during the year. They have been very welcoming and I expect to learn a lot from the two groups. Over all, this has been a big challenge and a major change in my life – but is proving to be well worth it for me as an individual and as a contributing employee for Autodesk.

And finally, let's see if they would do it again?

Simon: Ask me again next May when (if) I return. ;-)

Jon: Definitely. And I'd recommend it to anyone. This is a big growing opportunity. I particularly like how the news and information has a different focus here.

Living in the U.S. is very isolating with regard to how others live and what they are like in the world. Every chance we can have to expand our knowledge and understanding across the globe can be of great value.

-Simon Freihart

