

Prime Relocation

Language Training is Key for Expatriates



The arguments in favour are clear

Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going.

We cannot stress enough the importance of learning the language of your new country. Even if English is widely spoken, learning the native language will give you a chance to truly interact with the locals, show respect for the local culture and engage in the full expat experience.

In order to feel “at home”, being able to understand and speak some of the language – at least daily conversation, is important. A person can survive in a different country and culture, but to be relaxed and have a true feeling of “fitting in” and being aware of the feel of the culture and people’s attitudes, local language skills are important.

How do expats in Switzerland fare?

Sadly, many expats, in our experience, are lazy and don’t bother to learn the local language or try shortly and then give up easily. As a consequence, they struggle to fit in, don’t really feel at ease and are never accepted on a personal level by locals. It is such a pity! These expats lose a wonderful opportunity for personal and cultural enrichment.

It has to be said that learning German is difficult and one has to learn a language here in the German speaking part of Switzerland that is not normally

spoken on the street by the locals – High German. This is, however, the official language of German speaking Switzerland; it is the language taught in schools from age 5 onwards, it is the language of government and of newspapers. Of course, German speaking Swiss still feel inclined to speak Swiss German at every opportunity as this is their native language and “mother tongue”.

Although Swiss German is a simple language with few tense forms and lacking in vocabulary and expression, it is unique, the dialects are still going strong and German speaking Swiss feel most comfortable and able to express themselves succinctly when speaking it. It has been described rather sweetly as the “language of the heart.” There are now courses to learn Swiss German, but it is advisable to start with High German and hope that Swiss German will follow as a natural progression

Many expats with strong linguistic skills do manage to learn German and Swiss German and learn it well, but it does take hard work and dedication.

International research studies have shown that learning the local language has been rated by expats as the biggest hurdle to overcome when relocating, but please don’t be put off by this fact.

Even Germans who come here from neighbouring Germany are finding it difficult to come to grips with Swiss German – they soon understand it, but speaking it themselves is difficult and explain “when I speak it,

it sounds ridiculous!". Have they ever heard how we sound when we try??

What is the best Method?

The best way to learn the language is to find a programme that works best for you. Many sign up at a local language school class and find this an interesting way of meeting other expats in a similar situation to themselves. There is also the option of having a private tutor come to your office and teach you there. Nowadays there are also a number of great language CDs, DVDs and online courses available.

Find a Non Threatening Environment and be brave

One of my best friends who lived here for five years and had her two children here, learnt Swiss German on the playground with her children. By conversing with other Swiss mums about the kids in a simple dialogue, my friend gained confidence and went from strength to strength in her linguistic abilities. Clearly she wasn't afraid of getting it wrong or making a fool of herself, but she did make contact with the locals and feel like she "fitted in " a little.

Learning on a Budget

It may come as a surprise to you, but learning a new language is often facilitated through watching TV programmes in that language; this helps you to develop an ear for the sounds of the language. Visiting your local library could also be an amazing resource for tapes and books on learning the foreign language or to find books on the culture of the country. You may also want to borrow DVDs in the foreign language from the library.

Alternatively, find a student to get some cheap personal tutoring. It is always best to get a native speaker to teach you the language. Many students are keen to learn English in exchange for some German.

Where is your Willpower?

The most important piece of advice we can give you when learning a new language is to not give up easily and forget your inhibitions – be prepared to make a fool of yourselves – once, twice or even a few times – it is all part of the experience of living abroad! Don't forget how good you feel when you get a phrase right and even a reply back – then you know you are making progress and this will motivate you to continue. Viel Glück!