

## Go Global

## Coming to America

- By Pat Tan

Many of us will remember the hilarious antics of Eddie Murphy in the film *Coming to America*, where he plays an African prince trying to understand the American way of life. As an international realtor, I regularly work with individuals and families who wish to emigrate to U.S.A. and settle here. Having gone down that route myself in 1990s when we emigrated here from England, I try to make my clients' journey as smooth as possible and find myself giving advice on many different matters.

To emigrate to another country is a life changing decision, and not one to be taken lightly. It requires detailed planning, and a team of experts to help execute the plan. A key partner in drawing up that plan should be a U.S. immigration attorney, and preferably one whose practice is dedicated to immigration law. Following detailed discussions, the immigration attorney will map out a plan to achieve the would-be immigrant's goals. The plan may include many steps and require several years to get the client from their "alien" status to become a green card holder, or citizen of the United States of America. For instance, the immigration attorney may advise a client not to dispose of any business interests in their home country, as they could be valuable tools in a visa application.

The immigration attorney and the client then assemble a team of professionals to help execute that plan. The team may include: accountant, banker, business attorney, business broker and a real estate advisor. Once the team is assembled, the hard work begins.

I encourage my clients to do lots of research first. They need to understand the demographics of the location they plan to move to – population, age, education, income levels. They also need to look into the commercial, business and economic environment.

It is important that they don't assume things work the same way as they do in their home country. They rarely do. Hence, the need for local professionals to help avoid mistakes that could be costly.

Ideally, new immigrants should have enough cash reserves to get themselves established here. They cannot obtain loans or credit cards until they have a U.S. credit history. They may also encounter problems obtaining insurance, opening accounts with utility companies, and even opening a bank account can be challenging.

Any real estate decisions should also be supported by lots of research. The house may be great, but what about the schools, age of the neighbors, HOA rules and regulations, impact of any planned development nearby for instance. Similarly for commercial buildings: with they meet the present and planned needs for a business, are they easily accessible, and close to core market areas? Financial implications of leasing a building versus owning one should also be considered.

Prospective immigrants should not expect the purchase of U.S. real estate to be in any way similar to the process used in their home country. Typically things move faster here, and any deposits made may be at risk if contracts are not written to protect them and their money. In many countries, for instance, contracts are negotiated verbally and may not be written down and binding for several days or weeks after negotiations are concluded. In many countries, real estate agents are not licensed and the markets operate very differently from ours.

Education is a very important aspect of immigration for families, and they first need to understand the structure of our schooling system which may vary greatly from that of their home country. They need to be assured that their destination city can provide their children with a great education. They will often look at private as well as public schools to find the best fit. Children may take some time to adjust to a new school and environment. For instance, most countries in the world no longer use the imperial measurements of feet and inches, pounds and ounces. A child used to working in meters and centimeters, kilos and grams may need some assistance. Language may be more or less of a problem to a child entering the school system here, depending upon their proficiency in English. However, I remember my own young sons, whose first language is English encountering a few challenges - fire hydrant, flashlight and kindergarten were all new words for them as I recall!

My intention here is not to scare away those looking to settle in America – far from it. AS Miguel de Cervantes, the author of Don Quixote said:

Forewarned is forearmed. To be prepared is half the victory!

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