

# From New York to New Bethesda *(and other stops in between)*

**W**hen Sherwin Bryce-Pease wakes up in Manhattan he has no idea what his working day will bring. As the SABC's representative in the US his task is enormous: he must contextualise the country's major news events, which can range from the death of Michael Jackson to developments at the United Nations, for a South African TV audience half a world away.

Sherwin is young (30) and unmarried and therefore more suited to a lifestyle of pick up and go. But he still misses his parents and family back in South Africa. "I must always be ready at very short notice, so my lifestyle definitely fits someone without family responsibilities. I stay in contact with my family, of course. It's easy via email, phone, Skype, Facebook and whatever new gadget Apple brings out next."

Simon Gifford is a South African who calls Madrid home these days. As management consultant at Genesis Management Consulting he spends at least three days a week away from home, usually in the UK, but also frequently in France, Denmark and Switzerland.

In his job he helps clients solve complex business issues and to make strategic decisions in these times of doubt and financial insecurity. When it comes to his own lifestyle as high-paced businessman, there is little doubt and insecurity - he has long since figured out what works for him.

"I actually have left suitcases of clothes at various places around the world," he says. "So when I go to London I just take my laptop bag, my passport, wallet, mobiles and iPod. I even have a few squash rackets scattered around the world and try to play when I can. There's also a spare saxophone at my brother's place in Surrey, with which I torture his family if I get

Those at the cutting edge of their professions are familiar with working long, thankless hours, often spent hunched over a laptop in yet another hotel in a country where inhabitants don't quite know what you mean when you slip out an accidental 'Howzit'. But the jetsetter lifestyle doesn't suit all businesspeople. Some head for a small platteland town as soon as they get the chance. **Toast Coetzer** speaks to people who have made their choice between these routes, and a couple which manages to keep a foot in both worlds.



Illustrations: Fred Moulton

time!"

Besides playing squash to keep fit, Simon is also a jogger - his running shoes travel with him all the time. "I enjoy consulting, and if one approaches travelling with the right attitude then it can be fun and adventurous. I actually feel more privileged than

sorry for myself as these experiences can enrich one's life. Plus, planes and trains offer a great time to catch up on correspondence, reading and sleeping."

Simon says he literally knows where every plug point is in Gatwick Airport. "It is very easy to stay in contact fairly

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cheaply these days. I have two sons who live in South Africa and I phone them almost every day. I also write a weekly e-mail note - 'The Friday Smile' - to more than 500 friends and colleagues around the world. It's basically just a few lines about my life and some funny story or joke. It's a good way to keep in contact with distant friends, reminding them that you still exist."

While he works long hours, Simon also makes sure that he takes enough vacation - usually three months a year during which he spends quality time with family and friends. And what if he suddenly craves something truly South African? "There are plenty of Nando's branches in London... And I'm also part of a group called 'Amigos du Sudafrica' - we get together every now and then to enjoy some good South African wine and braaivleis!"

The balance which Simon seems to maintain with such ease isn't always

possible for others. People have different and changing needs, and not everyone sees 'business' as something you do while wearing a suit and tie either.

William Davis (who was a full-time MBA student at the USB in 2009) has no plans to follow the traditional model of 'making it'. His business venture, Gap Year South Africa, is deeply rooted in community upliftment through sports coaching and environmental education. Though William currently lives in Cape Town, Gap Year South Africa mostly places its clients - young people and students from Europe and North America - in the Eastern Cape.

"I'm originally from Port Elizabeth," he says. "I suppose you can say that I'm returning to my roots. The Eastern Cape is one of the poorest provinces and there's a real need for community development. Human capital, that's what the province needs. And it's a two-way learning

process, because the students from the Europe or the USA come here and get exposure to the ways of the developing world. That sparks an affinity, an understanding, and even when they eventually return to their home countries they often continue their support. Many also pay return visits."

**H** **HEATHER SONN (38)** **ALSO FEELS** that she has reached a point in her career where it's more important to give rather than take. In her impressive career so far she has been an investment banking analyst in New York, an asset manager in Cape Town and a CEO for a stockbroker in Johannesburg. She has also started a small investment company and worked for ABSA/ Barclays in London.

It was during this latter period of her life when Heather decided to change the way she was living. "I had limited involvement in my children's lives," she admits. She and her husband, Devon Prather (who used to work as an equity derivatives trader), have two children. "They were facing challenges that I realised could be made easier with my support. I also couldn't separate my work persona - which is driven by schedules, deadlines, agendas and delegation - to one which could work at home where flexibility, gentleness and surrender are required for a happy, functioning home and grounded, expressive children."

Heather, Devon and their children now live in Tokai just outside Cape Town. "I wanted us to grow together. I also wanted a working alternative for my children - a life of constant striving and hoping that would someday lead to happiness and fulfilment."

They're currently planning to set up a non-profit venture which will aim to enrich children's schooling with extra mural activities like sport, art, mediation sessions and tutoring. "We are planning our middle-way now: to derive a livelihood from



a venture with social impact and to have our kids be part of the environment we create.”

Nomfundo Mbaba-Tshabalala is a marketing manager for the Soccer World Cup host city of Polokwane. She frequently has to fly to meetings elsewhere in the country, but also sometimes to Europe. When I finally track her down, she responds from her BlackBerry – very typical in these office-in-our-pocket times.

Even though she and her husband don't have children, she still feels that time spent separated from her husband has an impact. “When I'm away our phone bill increases, as my husband and I call each other every night,” she writes. “Living in different countries is not ideal for a young marriage. I want to enjoy my time with my husband before we expand the immediate family. I feel life is too short and you have to do the best for yourself and your family. I want to travel for pleasure. The lonely hotel room must now change to a room for two! But who knows, the itch to go back to a lifestyle of business travel may come back.”

Children can certainly change how business people live their lives. Whether it's settling down to have children or, as in the case of journalist and media personality Max du Preez, simply having to decide where you want your child to attend school, children have a real influence. Max left Johannesburg 12 years ago and bought a small plot in Napier in the Overberg. When I speak to him on the phone I can hear a racket echoing in the background.

“Ja,” says Max, “we are now in the Bo-Kaap. Our one son is starting high school so we're back in the city.” He and his wife still have the house in Napier though, and Max foresees regular shuttling between their two homes.

“Napier works for me. It's a great concept – I bought this old house with an old wagon shed in the backyard and converted it into an office. If you've got ADSL and DSTV then you're basically in the city. I got the papers delivered every day and read the New York Times and Washington Post online. If you then follow BBC throughout the day – well, most of

my clients never even knew I had left my penthouse in Melville!”

Moving to a small town is more than just a passing phase of his life. The fact that he has a big tree in the backyard, can keep chickens and geese and grow organic vegetables means that he doesn't have to sit in traffic inhaling toxic fumes on his way to work anymore.

“Nothing handles stress like nature,” Max says. “I can walk from my house in Napier straight onto the mountain. My wife is a graphic designer so she can also work from there. We'll probably move back there permanently in about three years.”

Napier also provides Max with the isolation and focus required when he's on deadline to finish a book project.

There are towns all over South Africa which offer a similar allure to city folk. They're usually within easy striking distance from the city – like Riebeeck-Kasteel outside Cape Town or Dullstroom in Mpumalanga for the Gautengens. Others are more isolated, like New Bethesda and Prince Albert in the Karoo. But while being a writer is relatively suited to moving to a small town, not all vocations can make such a smooth transition to the platteland.

58-year old David Blackie used to be a personal banker (at SAGE Trust, later ABSA) “before the term really existed yet”, he tells me. But after being in the Joburg rat race for more than two decades he decided that he had had enough, of the city and of his job.

“In 1996 four of us decided to start a wellness retreat in Prince Albert,” David tells me from a house so quiet you can almost hear it breathing in the background. “I'm not involved with that anymore, but I now have my own business as a holistic healer and I run meditation sessions three times a week. I also make portrait frames from my workshop at home. I used to have a little shop where I

sold everything from antiques to art. In a place like Prince Albert you have to use all your talents and learn a few new skills along the way if you want to survive.”

And that's something that outsiders don't always consider – just because a business person has moved to a small town doesn't necessarily mean he or she is retired and can simply spend their days watching the vervet monkeys feast in the mielie fields. You must still be able to make a living, and it doesn't matter if you do that by playing the stock market or by running a guest house from your back room.

“Not for a split second have I rued my decision to move here,” David says. “You can still make a simple existence here. The town has a unique atmosphere which I have never experienced anywhere else.”

Prince Albert's simplicity is also what enchants Yvette Breedt (44). She used to be a PA for the managing director of Sasol Synfuels in Johannesburg, but these days she and her husband enjoy a quieter lifestyle. She runs a 'posh' farm stall in town called Lah-di-dah.

“No one here cares what kind of car you drive, nor what label is on your denims,” Yvette says. Sure, there are things she misses (the theatre, movies and Nando's) and the town, for example, doesn't have a full-time vet.

The nearest airport is in George, two hours away, but, as she points out, many city dwellers can easily spend two hours in traffic every day, simply to get to work. And with telephones and the internet you can be as connected and in contact with people as you are in the city. “Everything just happens on a smaller scale here, and much, much more slowly. And everything is prettier.”

And would she ever make the move back to the rat race? “Never. Unless there's no other option. Life sometimes takes funny turns, you know ...” **a**

## How do you maintain balance in your lifestyle?

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sms 39841 (at standard SMS-rates)