

# goodadvice

YOUR FAMILY, YOUR MONEY, YOUR LIFE

## He's on the Road ...Again

Being married to a spouse who travels a lot is tricky under normal circumstances, but when you live in a foreign country away from family and friends, the situation can be even more intense. **Victoria Scott** talks to "Travel Widows" in the Gulf to see how they cope.

Daddy's business trips can be hard on everyone



**M**y husband had just left for a four-day trip to Singapore when I realised I'd come down with gastroenteritis. This would be bad enough at the best of times, but at eight months pregnant, it was downright awful. As a wretched night turned into a wretched day, I realised I was in trouble.

I needed help, but as a new expat, I had few close friends. I called to cancel a coffee date I'd made with a new acquaintance. "Oh, it's ok," she said. "I haven't got anything else to do. I'll come to keep you company." Thank God she did. By the time she turned up, I was more than fifty shades of gray, and could barely move. She called an ambulance.

My husband is a long-haul airline pilot. I'm one of thousands of women whose husbands work for the region's rapidly expanding airlines, so my lifestyle is far from unique in this part of the world. We don't have the monopoly on absent husbands, of course—many expat jobs involve a great deal of foreign travel, meaning that spouses and children often spend a lot of time in their newly-adopted country alone, which can be an isolating, stressful experience.

### CREATE A SUPPORT NETWORK

My unscheduled hospital stay was the beginning of a friendship. After a shared ambulance journey, two hours in A&E and a long day spent chatting in the ward, my acquaintance became a good friend. She's now one of my first points of contact if I have a crisis, and it's exactly this sort of support you need when your husband is thousands of miles away.

Journalist Marianne Makdisi lives in Dubai and is mother to two little boys, aged 4 and 7. She is also married to a pilot. "It's enormously helpful that we live in a compound where we're surrounded by other airline families, so there are always other wives around in the same boat," she says. "I tend to make plans for when he's away. Making social arrangements means I get some adult interaction while he's gone."

"I have a good circle of friends who never fail to open their doors to me and the kids," says Reen Latif, a mother of three children (5, 4 and 10 months) who lives in Qatar. Her husband works in real estate, and he averages three days out of the country each week. "A very good friend of mine moved away a couple years back. She was my main coping mechanism as her husband too travels a lot and

we would keep each other company most days. I wish she was still around."

### HAVE FRIENDS' NUMBERS ON SPEED DIAL

As any part-time single mum knows, it's one of life's unfortunate truths that crises always happen when you're on your own. Everything can be fine and then, bang, the car battery's dead, the cat's sick and your water tank has sprung a leak. How to deal with these events alone is a common worry.

Samantha Brydon from Doha, Qatar, makes sure she has the number of one of her husband's colleagues on speed dial: "I worry that something serious will happen while my husband is out of the country, like a serious illness or a car accident—you name it and I imagine it!" she says. "I have never needed to use the number, but it's good to know it's there."

Alia Riles lives in Qatar with her two children, who are aged four and seven months. Her husband works as a civil

## Prolonged time apart can make communication difficult—and joint parenting even trickier

engineer for the US government, a job which means he's been in Afghanistan for more than a year. His prolonged absence means that she's also discovered the importance of asking for help when you need it. "I work full time, but I'm lucky that I have a boss who understands my situation and knows when to let me have a moment," she says. "I also have domestic help, and although we have had our ups and downs, I am so thankful that I have her with me."

### DEALING WITH SPECIAL DAYS

As I approached my son's due date, the Icelandic volcanic ash cloud spread over the skies of Europe, grounding all flights for days. As my husband set off for a flight from Doha to the USA (nowhere near the cloud, of course), I was worried sick that he'd somehow be stranded and miss the birth.

Absence on special days—be it birthdays, religious festivals or even once-in-a-lifetime events like the births of children—is another fact of life we "travel widows" have to accept.

"Film all special events," advises Henriette Folmer, a veteran of the occasional single mum lifestyle, having notched up 33 years of marriage to a long-haul pilot, and having brought up two boys who are now in their 20s. "We started doing this when the kids were small, and we still watch the videos sometimes. That way, my husband has never missed seeing these moments."

"We were apart when I was told my second son had to be delivered via caesarean the next morning," says Marianne Makdisi. "I was in the UK, and my husband in Dubai. Amazingly, he managed to get on a night flight and made it, just as I was being prepared for surgery. I remember the nurses kept asking if he was coming, then finally he walked in, all suntanned—my knight in shining armour!"

### KIDS MISSING DADDY

It's not just on special days that you miss your husband, of course. Ordinary days are tough, too, and for your kids, it can be particularly hard to accept. As they get older, they become more aware of their father's absence. Until recently, our two-year old son thought that Daddy was simply asleep during his trips—which sometimes last four days! Nowadays, he's joining up the dots, asking "Mummy... Daddy's plane...airport?" It is a question that tugs at my heart every time.

Reen Latif can relate: "As the kids grow older they feel my husband's absence," she says. "There was one time when he was away and the kids and I went to dinner at a friend's place. We were getting out of the car when I heard my kids calling out "Daddy, Daddy!", and when I turned I saw this stranger, who from the back had the same build, haircut and almost the same clothes as my husband. That was truly an emotional moment."

### KEEP COMMUNICATION CHANNELS OPEN

As much as your children miss their Dad and you miss your spouse, it's very easy to fall into the trap of keeping your lives entirely separate. It takes effort to keep communication going. Prolonged time apart can make communication difficult—and joint parenting even trickier—but Henriette Folmer still believes that it's possible.

"We kept a diary with everything that had happened while my husband was



Don't sit around feeling sorry for yourself while your husband is away. Instead, schedule quality time with your friends (or maybe even just some "me time")



away written in it," she says. "Like things that happened at school, phone calls and appointments I had made for the boys. This meant he could still take part in raising the kids. Communication is for us is key, and now with the texting and Skype, it's really easy."

#### FIND A FLEXIBLE JOB

Many part-time single mums find their salvation in routine. School runs, for example, give daily life a rhythm that makes long absences easier to bear, and a job can bring the added benefit of an additional salary.

However, many women find holding down a full-time job and being a part-time single parent a very tall order. The answer for Elizabeth Dorton, the wife of

an airline pilot and mother to three teenage girls who lives in Doha, was to become her own boss.

"I have been self employed for 12 years so I can ensure I remain the anchor of the family," she says. "Try to manage your own work pattern so you have the satisfaction of knowing you are consistently there for the children. Working from home is ideal as you can maintain your sense of achievement, yet you are also able to support the children and be consistent. Remember the enormous, but often underestimated, value of just 'being there'."

#### ANYTHING GOES

Many mums find that routine is vital for keeping a family ticking over; school

hours provide a daily structure, and fixed (early) bed times can make a frenetic afternoon more bearable. They can, however, be tricky to keep to if you're running the family home alone.

Samantha Brydon's husband works as an investment banker, a job which takes him out of the country for several days a month. Mother to two-year-old twin girls, Samantha finds that relaxing a little helps a great deal.

"I approach each of my husband's trips with dread, and have learnt that the best way to cope is to do whatever is necessary to get us through it with the least amount of trauma," she says.

"Having a bit of fun, like making a tent over my four poster bed and sleeping under it with the girls, makes things →





easier. Things will get back to normal when he is home again, so I just go with the flow. If they want to eat chips every night and not have a bath, then that's what we do!"

Marianne Makdisi agrees. "I try to really enjoy the fact that I can get away with a really quick-and-easy dinner for the kids and I!" she says. "I can't feed my husband a boiled egg for dinner, but the kids love it."

#### DEALING WITH JEALOUSY

When our son was about two weeks old, my husband flew off to the USA for four days. It's an exhausting trip involving two long flights and lots of jet lag, but all I could imagine was that big, white, comfy bed he got to sleep in, in a big, clean, organised hotel bedroom. And it wasn't just his sleep I envied. I was jealous of the fact that he was able to continue his career while I wept, fed, and walked around in a daze for months.

This feeling is familiar to Samantha Brydon: "His travel does put an extra strain on our marriage," she says. "I find I view my husband's work travel as a holiday for him, as he stays in a nice hotel and goes out for dinners and gets to sleep undisturbed! That creates tension between us and he dreads telling me

**"You've got to adapt and appreciate the fact that he has a job...and he is doing this for the family."**

when the next trip is booked."

"There are times when he goes to really exotic places and you are here managing three kids in horrible summer heat, and it's awful," agrees Reen Latif. "But you've got to adapt and appreciate the fact that he actually has a job, that there's food on the table, a roof over our heads and he is doing all this for the family."

#### ADJUSTING TO BEING A FAMILY AGAIN

Some wives find that as hard as it can be adjusting to their husband's absence, it's equally hard to readjust to them being back in the family fold.

"When he gets back, we all have to adjust again," says Marianne Makdisi. "I've got used to being independent (plus I'm always a bit frazzled) and he's tired. He has to come back into the family, with all the noise and stress that entails. A good night's sleep definitely helps everyone."

"If you've got something important to talk about, never bring it up when he's just got back" advises Doha resident

Henriette Folmer. "Instead, pick your moment. If you talk over things when he's tired, you can end up having an argument."

#### WORRIES ABOUT INFIDELITY

My husband looks fabulous in his pilot's uniform, and it goes without saying that other women must notice this, too.

Back when my husband was working for a British airline, he flew a group of women to Spain for a hen weekend. They wolf-whistled him when he emerged from the flight deck to get a cup of coffee, and when he landed, the cabin crew handed him a piece of paper containing all of their names and phone numbers. The fact that my husband was bursting to tell me about this is one of the reasons I'm so relaxed about it all. Having said that, it would be an unusual woman who never worried about the potential for infidelity with a travelling lifestyle.

"I try not to think about infidelity as the potential is obviously there," says Marianne Makdisi. "On every flight my husband goes on, there are 27 mainly female flight attendants. And they go to

exotic locations! But I trust him not to jeopardise everything we've built up over 10 years of marriage. That said, I do get insecure if he talks about them too much."

#### IT'S NOT ALL BAD

While we miss him when he's gone, my husband's constant travelling has taught us to appreciate what we have a lot more. Time spent as a family unit feels truly precious, which I believe is a gift. And when my husband comes home from a trip I still get the feeling in my stomach I got when we first met; we never have a chance to get bored of each other.

Alia Riles agrees. "Our marriage has grown since we've been apart," she says. "My husband being gone has, oddly enough, drawn us closer together. When I was going through a bout of post-partum depression, my husband was the only one that recognised a pattern and was able to head off a bad episode before it started. This experience has also helped me to grow spiritually. My confidence is now amazing, knowing what I have coped with alone." ■