



TWO IS COMPANY

—Bangkok

Preface

In the latest in our ambassadors series, Monocle talks to the husband-and-wife team trying out the ultimate diplomatic job share scheme in the Thai capital.

WRITER

Justin Bergman

PHOTOGRAPHER

Cedric Arnold

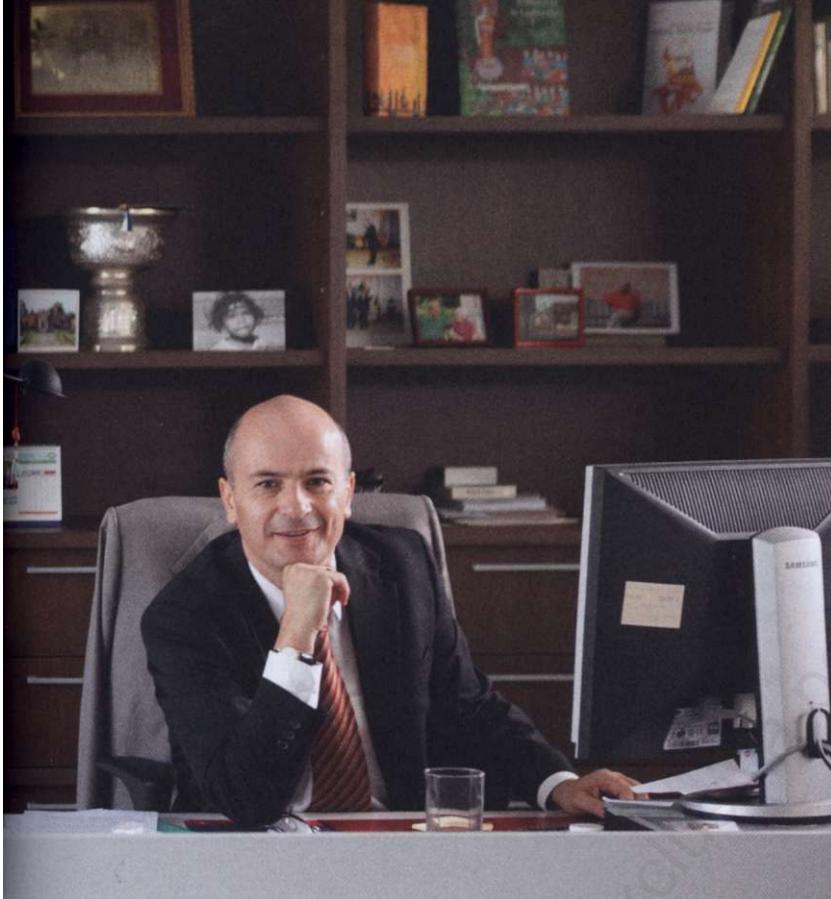
The diplomatic arrangement at Switzerland's embassy in Bangkok is sure to please those in charge of the finances at the Foreign Ministry: two ambassadors for the price of one.

However, it's been just as beneficial to the co-ambassadors, Christoph Burgener and his wife, Christine Schraner Burgener, who proposed the job-sharing scheme to the ministry so they could advance their careers at the same time - and still have time for their children.

The set-up is truly pioneering. Burgener and Schraner Burgener both hold the title of ambassador, but they're responsible for different countries in the region - Schraner Burgener is in charge of Thailand and Burgener focuses on Laos, Cambodia and Burma. (Before their four-year posting in 2009, one ambassador handled all four countries.) They share an office - their desks are two metres apart - as well as the same staff, resources, and salary. "We get 50 per cent of the salary each," Burgener says. "Of course, we work a lot more than 50 per cent, but it's a win-win for us as a couple."

The husband-and-wife team began job-sharing in the 1990s as counsellors to the Swiss ambassador to Ireland and later as joint heads of the human rights division at the Foreign Ministry in Bern - she worked mornings and he took over in the afternoons. When the ambassador position opened in Bangkok, they approached foreign minister Micheline Calmy-Rey with their idea as a way of promoting gender equality in the agency. "She was very quickly convinced - in a crisis, you are both there," Schraner Burgener says.

That proved prescient. When a border clash broke out between Thailand and Cambodia this year, the couple's reports to Bern were enhanced by the fact they could gather first-hand information from their respective countries and incorporate both of their viewpoints, Schraner Burgener says. Her husband stresses, however, that the couple never breach diplomatic protocol by discussing business in private, at their home adjacent to the embassy. "We don't have talks in the evenings about what we do about this or that," he says.



The biggest advantage is the ability to be in two places at once. With his wife in Bangkok, Burgener has been able to make nearly two dozen trips to his three countries and devote considerable attention to Burma, where he continues to press the government on democratic reforms and help coordinate the allocation of 836m (625m) in government and ngo aid money - much of it in areas devastated by Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Schraner Burgener, meanwhile, is in greater demand after hours. "The social life is very hectic," she says. "I go to more official functions and he is minding the children."

The Burgeners believe they have created a model that can work for other couples in the foreign service, where one spouse typically trails the other. Whether they've ever had problems working together, Burgener remains, as ever, diplomatic. "I have a wonderful wife, so we don't have any troubles," he says. "I think it's because we are rather different... I'm more the easy-going person; my wife is more the tough, professional type." — (M)

The Swiss mission in the Thai capital:

- 01 The embassy: The Swiss embassy is located in Bangkok's embassy district along Wireless Road. On the Thai side, much of the work is focused on processing the 14,000 visa applications the embassy receives every year and assisting the 150 Swiss companies doing business in Thailand. For Laos, Cambodia and Burma, the priority is overseeing development projects, as well as promoting democracy and human rights.
- 02 The staff: There are two other Swiss diplomats in the embassy: the deputy head of mission and a diplomatic counsellor. Overall, the mission has about 40 employees, many of whom work in the visa division. Switzerland also has honorary consuls in Vientiane (Laos), Phnom Penh (Cambodia) and Yangon (Burma) who help out only when a Swiss tourist has been injured or detained by police.
- 03 The challenges: Keeping Swiss residents in Thailand abreast of the latest developments during the recent political crisis was time-consuming. "Every day, I sent an SMS to the 6,500 Swiss citizens in Thailand to tell them what was going on," Schraner Burgener says.

Building bridges

South Sudan [EMBASSIES]

The Republic of South Sudan became the world's newest country on 9 July. New embassies and ambassadors are needed.

UK: Moved swiftly to re-christen its consul-general as ambassador and changed the name of its office in a fortified shady compound.

USA: Cut a ribbon outside its old building and called it new - but a vast construction site on the other side of the Nile is rumoured.

China: A big player in the old unified Sudan. For now, its diplomacy is still run from the car park of the Beijing Juba Hotel.

Sudan: South Sudan's foe during years of civil war announced it had opened a new embassy before independence. But no one in Juba seems to know, or care, where it is. — TMC

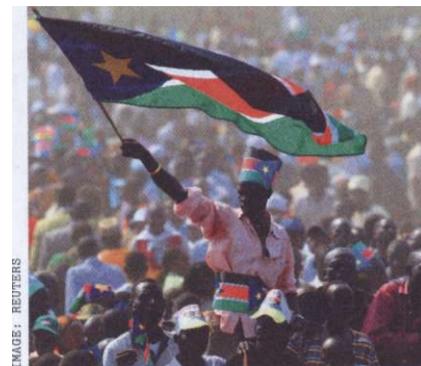


IMAGE: REUTERS

Housing benefit

USA [DIPLOMACY DISTRICT]

Washington city officials are finalising plans to carve out the US capital's second official diplomatic district, which could set off a major land rush by Foreign Ministry officials seeking new digs in what many consider their most prominent overseas posting.

As many as two dozen new embassies could be housed in a new Chancery Center on the sprawling grounds of the decommissioned Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the hospital where US presidents receive care. The self-contained site would be a lure for those countries working in prestigious embassy row addresses off Dupont Circle, where stately mansions have proven difficult to upgrade for modern tech and security needs.

But the State Department sees a strategic objective: one planning document anticipates "reciprocal action by other governments". In other words, a show of hospitality in Washington could help US diplomats in their own house-hunting abroad. — SPI