With good research infrastructure and nature all around, Switzerland is a great place to do science. The country ranks in the top six nations in investing in science and in the top three for the impact of its scientific publications. Coming from Italy (where things are quite different), I find the wealth of resources here fascinating. With such easy access to materials and services, it is easy to test out a new idea.

Similarly, when traveling the Zurich streets, one often finds nice things left streetside with a note attached: “Gratis zum Mitnehmen,” indicating that this piece of furniture, stereo, or flat-screen TV is free for whoever wants it. I am passionate about well-designed furniture and have picked up several pieces that were left beside the road. Once, as I was going to the lab on a Sunday evening to start up some bacterial cultures, I encountered an old woman emptying her cellar, happy to give me a lovely Danish-style sideboard from the 1970s.

Today, I am no longer thinking about furnishing my Zurich apartment, as I am preparing to move again. I have decided to join the group of Gunnar von Heijne at Stockholm University, one of the top labs studying the biophysics of membrane proteins. I have to bring my own funding, so deadlines for applying for postdoctoral mobility fellowships are among the many other deadlines that loom.

The Swiss National Science Foundation has mobility fellowship programs for people who have obtained a Ph.D. in this country, which give young researchers the opportunity to travel abroad for a postdoc and then, in conjunction with its Ambizione program, to return to Switzerland and set up their own research labs.

As a latter-day Ulysses, I realize that travel and relocation are essential steps for personal and cultural growth, and arguably the only way to ensure opportunities to carry out cutting-edge scientific research. But professional lives can collide with personal lives. The Ph.D. period can seriously delay or hinder life decisions like settling down with a partner or starting a family. Frustrated with this prolonged adolescence, many of my peers have decided to leave the academic track and remain here in Zurich, taking jobs in the country’s healthy pharmaceuticals industry or in consulting.

Going abroad to do science has disadvantages, but the advantages are greater. My visits to conferences and foreign labs have made it clear that the leading European groups in my field are connected like members of a widely dispersed family. Moving to a new lab in a new place will give me the opportunity to share ideas, have collaborations that otherwise would be difficult to start, build a great network, and in time establish a node of my own. I have ideas I’m eager to pursue, and I am looking forward to working in a new environment.

That is sufficient reason to leave, for a while at least, my beloved Zurich. As to my personal life, my girlfriend is coming. She works for a pharmaceutical company in Lucerne, close to Zurich. She will either apply for relocation within the same company or look for a similar position in Sweden. We will move together.

What is more, the Nordic countries have a pretty good reputation for furniture. I have already learned what “Gratis! Varsågod!” means in Swedish. We’ll see how it goes.

Jacopo Marino is finishing his Ph.D. in the Department of Chemistry at the University of Zurich in Switzerland. For more on life and career issues, see http://www.sciencecareers.org.
On the road again
Jacopo Marino

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