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Open hearts & homes

By [Beverly Creamer](#)
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In the kitchen the highchair sits ready, pristine and perfect. No mashed peas on the tray yet.

Upstairs in the kid room, the closet is full of little bitty clothes. The bookshelf is full of books. There's a flag of Ethiopia, books about Africa, and tapes of happy jazzy African music.

And there's a crib. Empty and waiting for a little girl who has already been named, sight unseen.

Amanda Arceo-Hosken and her husband, Army sergeant Andrew Hosken, are anxiously awaiting the day they board a plane for the 36-hour journey to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia to meet a child they call Adia, but who is not yet theirs.

With four months already invested in the international adoption process, they've been told it could likely take another four months. But that has given the Schofield Barracks couple time to research a country they knew little about and couldn't point to on a map before starting this process.

"In the simplest way it has made us more aware of Ethiopia as a nation," she says. "For instance, the city of Axum is one of the first places to use money. And the skeleton 'Lucy' is from Ethiopia. It's one of the few places in the world where Christians, Muslims and Jews live together peaceably."

International adoption has never been so high-profile. But while celebrities like Brad and Angie and Madonna are making it seem chic to have a rainbow family, the availability of children is



Dorothy Chen and Byron Han blow bubbles with their daughter, Anya, 2, at home in Niu Valley. The couple says they were lucky to adopt Anya before Chinese restrictions changed.

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INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION AT A GLANCE

- Choose a reputable agency to represent you; don't trust your adoption to the Internet.
- The country under consideration must have diplomatic ties with the United States, along with a government entity that is

diminishing — either because of changing perceptions in formerly willing countries, or because programs have been so popular that governments are increasing restrictions.

Cambodia has shut its doors. Korean adoptions have dropped to a trickle. And China, which has been allowing 20,000 adoptions a year — more than half of the children coming to American homes — has imposed health, income and age requirements for prospective parents. In Europe, only two countries in the former Soviet Union are still allowing orphans to leave, and even then it could mean a wait of several months in-country.

The price is steep, as well: international adoptions entail endless paperwork and cost anywhere from \$20,000 to \$40,000.

"The number of countries offering viable, predictable adoptions has decreased severely in the last couple of years," says Kristine Altwies Nicholson, who heads Hawaii International Child. The organization handles the adoption of more than 50 international orphans annually for Hawai'i and Mainland families.

"If you're looking for a Caucasian child, the former Soviet Union, which used to have a plethora of options, is now down to two — Kazakhstan and Russia. I just temporarily closed down my Kazakhstan program, because it's fairly uncertain and the in-country stay is now up to nine weeks," Altwies Nicholson said.

LUCKY TIMING

Dorothy Chen and Byron Han consider themselves lucky to have their daughter Anya, whom they adopted from China. Soon after Han, a senior software designer with Apple, went to Beijing almost two years ago to pick her up, Chinese adoption restrictions changed.

"It has slowed down since then," says Chen, a special-projects manager at the University of Hawai'i. "Some people with 'log-in' dates right after us are still waiting."

With the situation in flux, Americans are beginning to redefine how they see their families, what matters most to them, and how they can fit into the changing landscape.

capable of and prepared to process cases.

- International adoption takes a year on average, but many countries have closed or are closing their doors.
- The 10-year-old Hague Adoption Convention, which sets up strict standards for international adoption, has also slowed the process of international adoption. The U.S. has not yet ratified the convention but expects to do so within the next year. In order to adopt, both countries involved must have ratified the agreements; at the same time, agencies working in international adoption must be re-accredited.
- Children age 2 and older are generally more available, because most adoptive families are looking for infants. There are also special programs, such as Chances By Choice, based in Chicago, through which families may adopt children whose birth mothers had HIV/AIDS.

As a result, hopeful families trying to adopt internationally are increasingly turning to Africa — with growing interest in countries like Ethiopia, Kenya and Nigeria, where children are available and the wait is less than a year.

Additionally, adoption from Vietnam is still an option, partly because adoptive parents can be older.

"People have to expand their definitions and their comfort levels," says Altwies Nicholson, "and open their hearts and look more closely at why they want to be parents and how they define that and picture their families."

Angelina Jolie's daughter Zahara is from Ethiopia, and the feisty 2-year-old has won hearts around the world. Balanced on Brad Pitt or Jolie's hip, she's a constant presence in media pictures of the new family, playing with her Cambodian and Vietnamese brothers Maddox and Pax and her blonde baby sister, Shiloh.

"I don't know if it's because of Jolie drawing attention to it, or if it's just a sign of the way our culture is becoming nowadays," says Arceo-Hosken. "I've heard some negative things like she's collecting babies, but I think it's wonderful she's expanding her family like this. Is it the new chic thing to do?"

According to Altwies Nicholson, "Africa has had the biggest need of any continent," with so many babies orphaned by AIDS. And yet, says Altwies Nicholson, over the past decade, "Americans have absolutely not had an interest in looking to Africa."

Now, she sees a change occurring. "In the past five years Ethiopia has seen an exponential rise in adoptions in the U.S. from 200 in 2003 to 400 a year, then 700 a year, and now, just in the first quarter of this year, there were about 1,000."

THE RACE ISSUE

Once the Hoskens embraced a multiracial family for themselves, they wrestled with how their decision might affect the rest of their family — and then how African-American friends would react, especially those who had voiced objections to Caucasian couples raising black children.



Andrew Hosken prepares the baby's room for the arrival of a little girl from Ethiopia.

Courtesy of Arceo-Hosken family



Byron Han holds his daughter, Anya, 2, adopted from China, in front of their home in Niu Valley.

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"The first issue was the race issue, but I didn't want people making a bigger deal out of it than they had to," says Arceo-Hosken, a teacher at Lutheran High School of Hawai'i.

"I don't see what the big deal is. There are so many different families today, and the family unit is so different than it used to be. But I know my black friends have always made comments about nonblacks raising black children, and I talked to them first because that was my first concern."

Arceo-Hosken also researched the issue among grown adoptees, finding a young African-American woman on the Internet who expressed distaste for the way she had been raised by a white family, saying her adoptive family didn't give her what she needed in terms of her own racial awareness. Arceo-Hosken tracked her down and called — and found a very different reaction than what she read online.

"Honey," the woman told her, "I was young when I wrote that, and I feel differently now that I have children of my own."

Her words were comforting, and Arceo-Hosken and her husband have nothing but anticipation. There's also a possibility they will bring two children home, because they've said they're open to siblings. Their own families were also very supportive, and only concerned the child be healthy.

With adoption possibilities in such flux from so many countries, Altwies Nicholson spends much of her time searching for new options. For a year she's been building a relationship with Ethiopia, for instance, but it will still take another month before she's fully promoting that program.

A CHALLENGING PROCESS

"Though there are millions of children in need," Altwies Nicholson says, "unfortunately there aren't that many adoption opportunities. You have to have a stable country, strong diplomatic ties, an operating adoption policy and a government ministry which acknowledges international adoption and will process cases."



Laura Brevetti was in Hanoi, Vietnam, a few weeks ago to receive her new daughter, 2.

Courtesy of Bergman Brevetti family

THE CHEN-HAN FAMILY

Mom and dad: Dorothy and Byron

Adopted child: Anya from China

Length of adoption process: about 1 year

THE ARCEO-HOSKEN FAMILY

Mom and dad: Amanda Arceo-Hosken and Andrew Hosken

Adoptive child: Adia from Ethiopia

Length of adoption process: likely 8 months

That's just the start, she says.

"As a potential adoptive parent, you need an expert on your side. It's an emotional and challenging process and also an industry that has a lot of fraud and misrepresentation. It's not an area an individual should try to navigate using the Internet."

Sharon and Guy Price discovered how frustrating, difficult and lengthy it was in trying to adopt two children from Guatemala.

Today, two years after they began the process with Texas-based International Family Services that offers adoptions from Guatemala, they finally have both children.

Though the Prices had babies assigned to them for adoptions within a few days of birth, the infants weren't legally theirs to bring home for another eight months.

Twice, the couple journeyed to Guatemala to spend time with their children, but they weren't able to bring their little girl to Hawai'i until she was about 9 months old. Their adopted son was 15 months old before he could be brought to the Islands.

"There are so many babies out there and so many people who want babies," says Sharon Price, a 42-year-old social worker by training, who owns the Shasa boutique in Kahala Mall. "It's too bad they make the process so hard. I hope Guatemala and the U.S. can work something out."

In Guatemala, cases involving questionable, unethical or fraudulent behavior, among them the deception of biological Guatemalan parents, have raised U.S. concerns. There have also been recent media reports of adoption scams and subpar conditions in Guatemalan orphanages.

As a result, authorities are closely scrutinizing pending adoptions and the U.S. Department of State has cautioned American parents considering adoption from Guatemala to carefully consider their options. Many recent Guatemalan adoptions have been delayed or halted.

Reforms would be mandated by the international Hague Adoption

THE BERGMAN BREVETTI FAMILY

Dad and mom: Marty Bergman and Laura Brevetti

Adopted child: Alessandra from Vietnam

Length of adoption process: about 6 months

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Convention, which sets out strict standards for international adoption.

Once the Hague Adoption Convention is fully implemented in the U.S. within the next year, it's unlikely the U.S. will continue to process adoptions from Guatemala, according to the Joint Council on International Children's Services, an association of international placement agencies.

"Everything is bittersweet about adoption," Price says. "I don't think this was the parents' first choice. It's just complete poverty down there, and if they had money they never would have done it. And that's heartbreaking."

Marty Bergman, a retired New York-based freelance TV producer/reporter, and his attorney wife Laura Brevetti, had a far easier time adopting from Vietnam. It took only six months.

The couple are just back from Hanoi with their 26-month-old daughter, Alessandra, who was found abandoned on the doorstep of an orphanage.

"We didn't know whether we would succeed," says Bergman, who worked with Altwies Nicholson's Hawai'i agency. "But everything proceeded very smoothly. The agency recommended Vietnam because of our ages — 64 and 55."

CULTURE AT HOME

Families that adopt internationally have the added issue of handling new cultural diversity in their home.

The Prices say they'll immerse their children in as much Guatemalan culture as the youngsters want.

Same with the Brevetti Bergmans, who are already planning trips back to Vietnam when their daughter is older.

And the Hoskens have loaded up on Ethiopian music and say their child — or children — will definitely know those roots.

"I want to make their culture available to them, but I don't want to push it on them," says Arceo-Hosken. "I don't want them to feel like we're making them Ethiopian and not American."

The Chen Han family, with an adopted daughter of their own cultural background, are determined to build upon it even further.

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"We're both ethnically Chinese and have strong feelings about maintaining our culture," says Chen. "We've sent the boys to Chinese school since they were young, and since Anya came, they have much more motivation for using it. And we found it really helped her transition. Now she's bilingual — English because she's in daycare — and Chinese at home. Her dad speaks almost 100 percent Chinese with her."

Chen feels strongly that ethnic identity is an important piece of adoption.

"The children that were adopted from Korea and Vietnam (in the 1980s) are in their 20s and 30s now, and there's a lot of Internet conversation about what their experiences have been. For some, it didn't matter, but others had a real yearning about finding out more about their ethnic heritage or their roots. If you don't provide some diversity in their family life, there could be repercussions later."

For the Han Chen family who share the same culture, the joy of having another child is boundless.

"There are so many people on this earth and so few limited resources that we wanted to share the abundance we have with another person," she says, "but without bringing someone else into the world."

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[International adoption](#) has become increasingly difficult.

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