

How Canada is becoming a key player in global surrogacy

Over the next 10 months, the Star will follow three couples who have chosen Canada as the birthplace of their prospective children.

The Toronto Star will follow three international couples and their Canadian surrogates over the next 10 months.

By [Robert Cribb](#) Foreign, Investigations, and Emma Jarratt Special to the Star
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Canada, renowned worldwide for maple syrup, hockey players and good manners, is fast earning a new reputation in the global economy: a place where a small but stable band of women are willing to carry the babies of strangers.

For the past few years, foreigners have been drawn to Canada and Canadian surrogates in increasing numbers.

No one keeps statistics, but this baby-boom business is so brisk that one agency, Surrogacy in Canada Online, had to stop accepting applications temporarily from intended parents in April due to overwhelming demand.

A confluence of factors have led to this demand, including Canada's advanced fertility technology; a sophisticated publicly funded health-care system; and an increasing number of countries banning foreign surrogacy while Canadian law allows for it. In addition, Canadian surrogacy is relatively inexpensive, as Canada bans surrogates from being paid.

"Compared to the U.S., where intended parents have to pay for expensive insurance policies to cover their surrogate's pregnancy (and) birth, Canada is a cheaper alternative," says Sally Rhoads-Heinrich, whose Surrogacy in Canada Online agency has a waiting list of more than 400 couples awaiting Canadian surrogates.

"But this comes at a cost to our health-care system and taxpayers."



When Michael Serwa, left, and his partner Jordi Piqueras began their search for a surrogate in Canada, they were matched with 27-year-old Chantelle McCallum, right. McCallum Serwa and Piqueras sent the photo at right to tell them she would be their surrogate. (Toronto Star / Rick Madonik)

Over the next 10 months, the Star will follow couples from Australia, the United States and Spain who have chosen Canada as the birthplace of their prospective children.

Their stories and the stories of the Canadian women who have volunteered to give these couples the children they desperately want reveal an international phenomenon.

We will explore the complexities of cross-border baby making; the relationships between intended parents and their surrogates; the decisions that must be made, such as “shopping” for eggs and sperm in banks around the world; and the technology that allows an egg from a woman in Washington or sperm from a man in Spain to make a baby in the womb of woman in Canada.

Canadian women are assuming roles previously played by women in India, Mexico and Thailand, where multibillion-dollar surrogacy industries have recently been shut down because of widespread exploitation and abuse. Thousands of women were effectively employed as full-time incubators in exchange for hefty profits collected by clinics and industry bosses.

There are many questions we will seek to answer. Should Canadian surrogates be paid? Who should pay for the medical care of surrogates? Should surrogacy agencies be more tightly regulated?

Now, meet our baby-making teams. . .

TEAM SPAIN



Michael Serwa, right, and his partner Jordi Piqueras meet surrogate Chantelle McCallum for the first time at Toronto's Pearson Airport, a nearly halfway point between the couple's home in Spain and McCallum's home in B.C. (Rick Madonik/Toronto Star)

When Michael Serwa and Jordi Piqueras met three years ago in their hometown of Barcelona, one of their first conversations was about their shared desire to have kids. They were married two years later and immediately began searching for countries that would accept a gay couple seeking a surrogate.

Surrogacy remains illegal in Spain. They were leaning toward Mexico, but the country shut down its foreign surrogacy industry. Many Google searches later, they landed on Canada.

Canada was dramatically cheaper than the United States, where health-care costs and payments to surrogates are common. The couple has budgeted \$80,000 to \$100,000 to have their child in Canada.

“Canada is one of the best options, not only because it’s cheaper, but because you can actually have both (father’s) names on the birth certificate, so there wouldn’t be any issues of one of us having to adopt the child afterwards,” says Michael, 28, an operations manager for an IT firm in Barcelona.

“And, also, because people would prefer to go with someone who actually wants to help the couple, rather than thinking, maybe she’s doing it for the money.”

They posted a profile on a Canadian agency website seeking a birth mother.

A week later, they were matched with Chantelle McCallum, a 27-year-old single mother of two young children in Victoria, B.C., who, after several weeks of “online dating” with the prospective fathers, agreed to be their surrogate.

“It’s very rewarding to be a parent, so knowing what that’s like, I want to help someone else become a family, rather than just (be) a couple. It’s nine months of my life, but it’s the rest of their lives.”



McCallum sent Serwa and Piquera these photos after a successful embryo transfer, left, and after her pregnancy test came back positive. (Supplied photo)

Why did the couple choose Chantelle?

“She’s a social worker and she told us a lot of stories about how she takes care of people,” says Michael. “We wanted someone like this.”

Says Jordi: “I think she’s very sweet.”

She felt the same way during their communications over Facebook and Skype, she says.

“We just seemed to be on the same level,” she says. “It’s kind of how you click with your friends.”

After months of fertility treatments, anticipation and preparation, Michael, Jordi and Chantelle met for the first time in April in Toronto, which is nearly halfway between the two homes.

As Chantelle emerged through airport security doors at Pearson, the relative strangers embraced for the first time.

In the following days, she would undergo a transfer procedure that placed the embryos in her uterus in the hope she would become pregnant.

Two weeks later, Michael and Jordi received the news in a photo Chantelle emailed them showing her pregnancy test stick: it worked.

Chantelle is now 11 weeks pregnant.

TEAM AUSTRALIA



Caryn and David Crabb, from Australia, consider their surrogate, Paula Capa, a "blessing." (Supplied photo)

Caryn and David Crabb were stunned when, after five years of trying to get pregnant, their doctor told them their best chance at being parents was surrogacy.

It's easier said than done in Australia, where surrogacy is not a well-developed branch of fertility medicine and surrogates are notoriously rare.

"We were devastated. I always dreamed of being pregnant and the feeling of carrying a baby," says Caryn from her home in Brisbane. "It took us a little time to come to terms with this advice."

The couple, who have been together for 15 years, began the process in Australia, to no avail.

"Surrogates are like unicorns in Australia," says Caryn who, with David, researched clinics in Mexico, Nepal, Cambodia and the U.S., the latter being far beyond their reach financially. "In May 2015, we went to a surrogacy conference in Sydney and someone suggested to research Canada."

The couple signed with a Canadian surrogacy agency that August and was matched with their first surrogate in September 2015. They shipped their three remaining embryos 15,000 kilometres to Toronto.

“(It) was very nerve-racking,” says Caryn. “We did have a positive pregnancy test, but the surrogate miscarried at seven weeks. (She) had major complications from the miscarriage and respectfully made the decision not to continue.”

Caryn and David started again and ultimately found Paula Capa, a 33-year-old mother of two twin boys in Kitchener.

“Paula is an absolute blessing,” says Caryn, who has never met her surrogate in person.

What drew Paula and the Australian couple together was the surrogate’s unique attitude.

“I want to walk away into the sunset. I’m not in this to make a best friend,” says Paula. “No woman is hoping for a family through a surrogate. No woman wants this.”



Paula Capa, a veteran surrogate, has been matched with Caryn and David Crabb. “I want to walk away into the sunset. I’m not in this to make a best friend,” says Capa (J.P. MOCZULSKI/The Toronto Star)

Paula’s willingness to walk away takes an emotional burden off Caryn and David, who are already stretched financially.

David, 36, has two jobs and Caryn, 39, works at a bank.

While they have been saving as much as possible, a loan is the only way to make ends meet. They will have just enough to pay for the expenses of the surrogacy and take two trips to Canada: Caryn will come for the 20-week scan and the couple will both come for the birth.

But those milestones could be a way off.

The Aussie couple sent three eggs in 2015. One was transferred to a previous surrogate who miscarried. In April, doctors attempted a transfer of Caryn's last two embryos to Paula. It didn't work.

"After a lot consideration and very lengthy discussions, David and I decided to proceed down the path of embryo donation," says Caryn.

The couple spent months "shopping" dozens of egg and sperm donors, and, in June, finally decided.

The sperm donor is a Toronto man of Italian ethnicity with dark, curly brown hair and brown eyes — just like David. Four eggs came from a Toronto woman who looks like Caryn: Caucasian, with red hair and blue eyes.

"We have to keep pinching ourselves to believe this is real," Caryn wrote in an email. "We are over the moon and can't believe how lucky we are."

Caryn, David and Paula are waiting to find out from their fertility clinic when they can try again.

They will be attempting twins for the second time.

"We really want a healthy, happy baby or babies," says Caryn.

It's certainly not the path Caryn and David dreamed of throughout their life together, but they hope that when they reach the end of the process it will make them appreciate their child that much more.

"We are very much looking forward to scheduling in our next transfer and having a beautiful babe or babies bless our arms," says Caryn.

TEAM U.S.A.



Paul, in dark shirt, an emergency room doctor, and his partner Steve, a consultant, are Americans who have come to Canada to look for a surrogate mother. The couple have spent five years carefully planning, choosing and executing their surrogacy. (Chris So/Toronto Star)

Paul and Steve have been together for 13 years and dream of building a life that includes children.

Paul, a doctor, and Steve, a consultant from Florida, come from large, loving families and sought a way around the limitations of biology, so they entered the world of surrogacy.

They have asked that their last names, the city where they live and the last name of their surrogate, not be published.

The couple have spent five years carefully planning, choosing and executing their surrogacy. With the help of Trudy, a Peterborough woman, Paul and Steve are mere months away from becoming dads, something that, just a few decades ago, might never have been possible.

“Our surrogate is a nurse. She’s medically trained. She’s a firefighter,” says Paul of Trudy. “She also has four children of her own, so we know that she knows how to successfully carry a baby.”

Their pre-baby-making to-do list was long: rounds of sperm analysis; consultation; surrogate interviews; tracking down the perfect egg, which turns out to be a part Hawaiian, African American, Japanese and Scottish embryo from Washington, D.C.; and, finally, getting egg, dads and surrogate to meet at the same time and place for the transfer.

What ultimately made Canada their preferred destination was not so much cost, but customer service.

“A lot of surrogacy companies in the United States are run by lawyers and businessmen, which we found a little bit of a turnoff,” says Steve. “We felt they were less personal. They had trouble keeping track of our names. They didn’t know who we were. It’s a much bigger production in the United States.”

When Paul and Steve, both 47, eventually landed in a Toronto clinic, they knew they had found the right place.

With their doctor regularly available for Skype chats and a fleet of lawyers and support workers who knew their case, not to mention an altruistic surrogate, they immediately connected.

In January, they transferred two embryos to Trudy, and, although one didn’t take, the other, a girl they will name Vivian, is now at 25 weeks gestation.

The prospective dads told their families on Mother’s Day.

“The whole family is very excited. My mother is very happy, because she only has grandsons and this will be her first granddaughter,” says Steve.

“She’s already started sewing.”

Before the pregnancy, Paul, Steve and Trudy, 32, spent weeks getting to know each other with visits between Florida and Toronto, even celebrating birthdays and exchanging text messages daily.

“We really like her. We respect her,” says Steve. “We feel very lucky with regards to the process and how it’s been for us.”

“We fully expect to be lifelong friends,” says Paul.

“She’s family already.”