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# A Roadmap for Your Hero's Journey



Raise your hand if you watched Bill Moyers' interview series with Joseph Campbell in the 80s, *The Power of Myth*.

It may be 40 years old, but the subject matter, which explores the universality of myths and how they affect the choices we make, is timeless. A world-renowned scholar, Campbell's seminal concept of the "[hero's journey](#)" influenced countless writers and filmmakers... including George Lucas, who consulted Campbell on [Star Wars](#).

One of Campbell's most popular quotes, "follow your bliss," has come to grace many a yoga t-shirt. Coined in the 70s, Campbell was calling us to embark on our own hero's journey, or to let our inner voice guide us toward true fulfillment.

The hero's journey is never easy... Look how long it took Luke Skywalker to master the Force. So here at *IL*, our mission is to give you a practical roadmap for going abroad... and finding your bliss.

Once a year, we go all-in with our Global Retirement Index. In this issue, we reveal the top spots in Latin America, Europe, and Southeast Asia.

The overall winner is a country that leap-

frogged over the competition this year, thanks to outstanding benefits for retirees and an increasingly high quality of life. There are few—if any—comforts Americans have to sacrifice to live here—and live luxuriously—for less than \$3,000 a month.

We welcomed the largest crowd EVER at our Ultimate Go-Overseas Bootcamp in Las Vegas this October. It's always gratifying to see someone come in with one country in mind for retirement... and come away with another idea entirely. Read our feature story to learn why Uruguay was many attendees' wildcard winner.

France is a far easier option for overseas living than many imagine. We recap why two under-the-radar French towns we reported on this year—with easy access to Spain—are beloved by expats. And Tuula Rampont takes us to Provence for a Christmas market you'll never forget...

There's much, much more packed into this issue. Including one tip you shouldn't miss: How to lock-in a super cheap, long-term car rental in Europe.

*Stephanie Reed*

Stephanie Reed, Editor-in-Chief

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Colorful *ponche navideño* is Mexico's favorite holiday drink, served with or without alcohol.

BON APPETIT (BUEN PROVECHO)

## Try These Iconic Tastes of Mexico for the Holidays

Christmas in Mexico, as in most countries, is all about food, family, and festivities. The holiday season starts on December 12, with the Festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and stretches to the Day of the Magi on January 6.

When I asked Mexican friends for the first thing that came to mind when they thought of Christmas, *ponche navideño* and *buñuelos* were the resounding answers. *Ponche* (Spanish for punch) is a warm spiced fruit punch, and *buñuelos* are delicious, sweet fried dough cakes, like fritters. And both are easy to make...

*Ponche* is similar to mulled wine, made with fresh and dried fruits and spices simmered in a sweetened alcohol base. You begin with *tejocotes* (hawthorn fruit) and add sugarcane, hibiscus flowers, and tamarind to make a perfect blend of sour, sweet, and spice. (*Tejocotes* look like crab apples, which can be easily substituted, or you can use Asian pears.)

You can add your alcohol of choice when serving (I like to add a dash of rum or brandy).

Here's a great [Ponche Navideño](#) recipe to bring Mexico into your home this holiday season. Remember to serve with

a cinnamon stick and a spoon, so you can eat the chopped fruit at the bottom of the cup. That's the best bit!

*Buñuelos* are about as Christmas-y as you can get. Sweet crispy little slices of heaven that perfectly accompany *ponche*. They're so iconic that the Mexican government [shares their history](#) as part of the country's holiday traditions.

Each region of Mexico has their own twist on *buñuelos*. In the north, or Baja California Sur, they're enjoyed with *piloncillo*, honey, and guava. Whereas in Oaxaca, they're sprinkled with red sugar, and in Chiapas, they're flavored with lemon zest and orange juice.

This Christmas, I'm excited because my neighbors in Cozumel are going to share their family's *buñuelo* recipes with me.

Feliz Navidad from Mexico... and I hope you enjoy these recipes for a taste of a Mexican Christmas.

—Bel Woodhouse



Each region of Mexico has its own unique recipe for *buñuelos*.

© CARLOS ROJAS/ISTOCK

## WHERE TO EAT

# A Different Kind of “To Go” Meal in Prague

One of the best parts of travel is when you discover something wonderful completely by accident. And to walk around Prague, capital of the Czech Republic, is to discover one wonder after another.

While looking for lunch in Wenceslas Square, one sign in particular caught our eye. It read “Burgers on a Rail,” and pointed up some stairs. Intrigued, up we climbed... and discovered a restaurant that looked like it had been set up by a model railroad hobbyist. Train tracks crisscrossed everywhere, with metal stairs and platforms to work your way over the tracks to get to your seats.

We’d stumbled into the [Výtopna Railway Restaurant](#), specializing in burgers and steaks, but also serving pulled pork, fish, and other items. We were led over a trestle bridge to our numbered seats. An O-Scale train with an engine car about ten inches long and four inches tall would occasionally rumble past, towing foot-long flat cars loaded with food or beer to one of the other diners.

We placed our orders with a server—bacon cheeseburgers, fries, coleslaw, and beers—and she told us to watch for the train with our numbers on it. Our train arrived shortly with our beers, followed by our food.



© VÝTOPNA RAILWAY RESTAURANT

**“Burgers on a Rail” in New Town Prague is a must in Prague’s Wenceslas Square.**

Much to our delight, there was more to the restaurant than just a cute gimmick. The burger was incredible, one of the best I’ve ever had. The beef was excellent, the patty large and perfectly grilled.

As we climbed back over the trestle bridge to leave, we realized how lucky we were to have arrived before noon. The restaurant was now completely full, and

the line to get in went all the way down the stairs and out into the street.

My wife and I have visited at least a dozen capital cities around the world, including Istanbul, Rome, and Athens. But we agree that hands down, Prague is the most beautiful capital we’ve ever seen. And our visit to the Výtopna Railway Restaurant will be one of our fondest memories.

—Jim Santos

## THE PARADOX OF PRAGUE’S OLD TOWN AND NEW TOWN

Like many European cities, Prague can be divided roughly into two sections: the Old Town and the New Town. Prague is unique in that its Old Town was relatively untouched by World War II, so there are incredible buildings still standing from the 10th century on, creating a mind-blowing collage of art and architecture wherever you roam.

The “New” Town (founded in the 14th century by King Charles IV), is now as modern as any nation’s capital although it too has its own quirky features. For example, there’s the famous rotating Kafka



**Avant-garde architecture makes the Dancing House a focal point in Prague.**

head sculpture and the visually stunning Dancing House, a curvy office building occupying a riverfront corner designed by architects Vlado Milunić and Frank Gehry, and home to a [top-floor restaurant](#), [hotel](#), and [art gallery](#).

Ironically, one of the many highlights of New Town is something quite old—Wenceslas Square, more like a wide boulevard and famous as the site of the declaration of Czech Independence. For centuries, it was known simply as the Horse Market, but in 1912, it was re-dedicated to Saint Wenceslas with a statue erected in his honor.



FESTIVALS

# One Cruise, Four Countries, Four Magical Christmas Markets



## CHEAPER THAN BUYING? RENTING A CAR LONG-TERM IN EUROPE

Jeff D. Opdyke

For five years, I lived in Prague and never needed a car. Then I moved to a beach town west of Lisbon, and suddenly access to four wheels was a daily necessity.

I wasn't ready to plop down a big down payment, and my wife and I weren't sure what kind of car we wanted. Instead, we rented—long-term.

Every month, I lock in a rental car at **Lisbon's Humberto Delgado Airport**. The all-in cost is between \$150 and \$275 per month—far less than a traditional auto lease, and a heck of lot cheaper and more convenient than relying on taxis.

That's the thing about car rentals in many parts of Europe: Monthly rates can be surprisingly affordable. I just looked on Booking.com and found a Fiat 500 (Fiat's answer to the Mini Cooper) for just €159 (\$170), for *all* of February. That's just \$6.07 per day.

The benefits are manifold. No maintenance costs. Insurance is built into the contract if you use the right credit card. (Or you can buy insurance through the rental company, but count on that doubling the monthly cost.) And every month, you get to drive a different car.

The only downside is that you have to get accustomed to the quirks of a different car. But at barely more than \$6 per day, who can complain?

To be sure, high season pricing is 2x to 3x higher, so this strategy only makes financial sense in the off season.

Oh, and your US driver's license is perfectly fine.



© JON CHICA PARADA/ISTOCK

Last December, my family and I sailed into the port of Bruges and right into a Dickens novel... Horse-drawn carriages clapping by, twinkling holiday lights, and festive old-world trimmings in one of Europe's most picturesque towns.

We'd arrived on the [MSC Euribia](#) to indulge in the festive **Wintergloed Christmas Market**, where we found everything Belgium is famous for: exquisite lace, fragrant waffles, and rich chocolate. Sipping ice-cold, tangy ale, we watched vendors shaving melting layers of raclette cheese onto hot baguettes.

Bruges was our third port of call on a seven-day cruise across Northern Europe in search of yuletide flavors... and holiday shopping. Lots and lots of shopping.

Departing from Southampton UK, our itinerary would also include Hamburg, Germany; Rotterdam, Netherlands; and Le Havre, France.

In **Southampton**, along the path to the medieval town gates, booths were set up like a traditional German Christmas market. In one of the city's lovely green spaces, Southampton Common, we enjoyed a fireside meal in the half-timbered [Cowherds Pub](#).



© THOMAS LIEGGE/ISTOCK

Maria hopped off her winter cruise to visit Christmas markets in four countries.

In **Hamburg** two days later, we were met with carolers making merry tunes, offerings of *glühwein* (hot wine), and lanes of ornaments in Rathausmarkt square. After a cozy meal of sausage wursts and *spaetzle* (egg noodles) at the **Bavarian Franziskaner Restaurant**, we strolled the waterfront market stalls as squeals of children enjoying festival rides filled the air.

The modern port of **Rotterdam** was unfavorably cold and wet, but [Vessel 11](#) restaurant, a masterfully restored old English boat, welcomed us in. The floating red ship featured an iron staircase leading down to a nightclub with an iconic lighthouse jutting above it. We indulged in hot tea and eggs benedict, along with Dutch treats like *bitterballen*, similar to Spanish croquettes.

At the famous Rotterdam **Markthal** (market hall), we sampled *stroopwafel* liqueur, browsed the best stinky cheeses, and people watched. The indoor scene was lively, with wreaths hanging from the ceiling and a 15-foot tree at the grand entry. With the cold wet weather outside, it was a Dutch paradise inside.

The port of **Le Havre** was the final stop. We snacked on Nutella-filled crepes, browsed shelves of *Bûche de Noël* (the French Yule Log), and stocked up on more gifts.

We dressed for formal dinners each night on the cruise, enjoyed wine tasting events, and pampered ourselves with spa days. It was a wonderful way to be with family for the holidays and experience four magical European Christmas traditions in a short amount of time. Our seven-day cruise cost less than \$2,000 for three people, plus airfare and trains. [Go here](#) for booking details.

—Maria DiCicco

**Maria DiCicco** is an American travel writer with a love for slow, food-focused travel. She and her wanderlust family live part-time in Spain and Florida, taking multiple overseas trips annually. You can follow these adventures on her blog, [AlwaysPackTissues](#).

## Where to Find Good Value in the Caribbean and Safe-Haven Uruguay

Ronan McMahon



■ **Kevin M. asks:** I've vacationed on several Caribbean islands over the years and would love a home somewhere close to a Caribbean beach. But pricing in the best resorts, by the best beaches, is out of control. Is there a place in the Caribbean that offers good-value real estate? I have some money to invest, but not millions of dollars.

■ **Ronan says:** Hi Kevin, thanks for your question. As you point out, Caribbean islands are synonymous with luxury. Real estate prices on some of the most famous ones can be out of reach for those of us who don't have the bank balances of Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson.

But it is possible to find good-value, affordable real estate on a Caribbean island. There's one destination in particular that I think has huge potential... the master-planned community of Cap Cana in the Dominican Republic.

After Mexico's Riviera Maya, the Dominican Republic gets the most tourists in the entire Caribbean region. And it's smashing tourist records. In 2023, it welcomed more than 10 million travelers. It's expected to see 11.5 million in 2024. That's astonishing growth.

Most of these arrivals go to Punta Cana, easily the country's biggest destination. And this is where you'll find Cap Cana...

At 30,000 acres, Cap Cana is twice the size of Manhattan. [Everything in Cap Cana screams luxury.](#) It's home to 5-star resorts... the largest inland marina in the Caribbean... world-class golf... incredible fine-dining... and state-of-the-art equestrian facilities. Plus, the region's biggest water park opened here in 2024... and the setting is unrivaled. I've never seen sands so white, or waters so quintessentially Caribbean, as at the Juanillo Beach Club in the heart of Cap Cana.

The description "master-planned community" doesn't do Cap Cana justice. This is a vast semi-autonomous city-state

of luxury. I ranked it No. 2 on my list of the best places to buy real estate in 2025. ([Check out the top 10 here.](#))

In September, I brought members of my *Real Estate Trend Alert* (RETA) group a chance to own stunning condos in Cap Cana. These are just a stroll from Juanillo Beach. Plus, they have incredible sea-view amenities like an infinity pool, bar, restaurant, and gym.

The RETA members-only price for these condos was \$382,400. I bought alongside members in this deal. Not long after, the developer sent word he was raising prices and two-bed condos similar to those available to RETA members from \$384,400 were going to be listed at \$440,000—an uplift of \$55,600 in a matter of weeks. I expect five years after delivery our condos will be worth \$657,400.

I think Cap Cana has an amazing future. And I'm currently looking for another RETA-grade offering there... (To hear about this and all future RETA deals, learn how you can [become a member here.](#))

■ **Christie S. asks:** Do you have any upcoming deals in Uruguay? It has a generous long-term residency plan, and I'm interested in a safe haven from the current situation in the US.

■ **Ronan says:** Hi Christie, Uruguay is a great option as a safe haven. And it's a place that has been on my real estate beat for a long time.

Uruguay is known as the "Switzerland of South America," a nickname it has earned for its banking secrecy regulations, as well as its peaceful history and lack of corruption. This tiny country is the wealthiest (per capita) in South America, according to the World Bank, and the most democratic, according to *The Economist*. Here you'll get exclusivity, security, privacy, and opportunity... as well as a safe and peaceful place for you and your money.

(You can read more about Uruguay in this month's feature story, *The Best Places in the World to Retire in 2025.*)

I've been tracking Uruguay closely

since the earliest days of RETA, and bringing members investment opportunities here. Most recently, RETA members had an opportunity to buy ocean-view, walk-to-the-beach lots in the country's **Rocha** region. This stretch of Uruguay's Atlantic coast—a once-quiet coastal area with some of the best beaches in the country—is becoming a favorite vacation destination of South America's elite.

Back in July 2022, RETA members also had the chance to get in on another deal in Rocha, but this time back from the coast. The **Sierras de Rocha** is a landscape of unparalleled beauty, where rugged hills hide deep ravines, and valleys are crossed by small streams.

The opportunity here was to own 12- to 13-acre parcels of farmland in an unmatched location, just 20 minutes' drive to Rocha city and a further 25 minutes to **La Paloma** (Rocha's most important seaside resort), with prices running from \$73,000 to \$96,000. At the time, I figured on spending about \$110 per square foot to build a home. So, all told, for less than \$250,000, members could have a small farm and a country escape.

Back then I told RETA members: "In today's crazy world, the idea of a bolthole with a piece of land somewhere, where it's warm and sunny most of the year, where you're near the beach, but tucked away in the mountains away from it all is very appealing." And this holds true today, perhaps even more so.

I'm always on the lookout for new opportunities in Uruguay... and in fact, as you read this, my scout, Ciaran Madden, is getting ready to board a plane to Uruguay for two weeks to meet with my contacts and dig into the best opportunities. Ciaran will be sharing updates from the road in my free e-letter, *Your Overseas Dream Home*. [Sign up here to receive it.](#)

**Editor's Note:** Ronan McMahon is *IL*'s international real estate expert and founder of [Real Estate Trend Alert](#). If you have real estate questions and comments, email Ronan [here](#). We may publish your question along with Ronan's reply in *IL* Postcards or here in *IL* Magazine.





A growing US veteran community enjoys a better quality of life in Pattaya.

## Expats in Thailand Discover “The Best Thing About America”

Barton Walters

**P**alm trees and a salty breeze are great, but the people are what make an expat community special. During the past month, I’ve spent a lot of time in the neighborhood adjacent to mine and discovered a lively and diverse group, including a few Americans who’ve made the move to Thailand like me.

I was invited to a meeting of the “Pratumnak Hill Networking Group,” a stodgy name for a bunch of expats getting together to drink beer, listen to music, and pontificate on a wide array of topics... minus religion and politics of course. The meeting was at a tiny kiosk of a bar located on **Pratumnak Hill** (“The Hill”), the charming community sandwiched between the neon lights of **Pattaya City** and the laid-back shores of **Jomtien Beach** (where I live) on [Thailand’s Eastern Seaboard](#).

The bar’s owner is Kraig from San Diego. Kraig came to Thailand nearly 15 years ago and got into the real estate game. We talked about the ups and downs in Pattaya and the surrounding communities over the years. “The property business here has the personality of Thai people,” Kraig said. “Sometimes it slows

down, but it never completely comes to a standstill.”

When Kraig got tired of the hustle and flow of the real estate business, he and his wife Jane opened the **Island Bar** in a food court on The Hill called **The Checkpoint**, where there are ten to twelve bright yellow kiosks serving everything from Thai food to Tacos. Kraig gives the networking group a special two-for-one happy hour, so Jane is busy manning the Chang beer tap while he mixes the music and commiserates with the expats who show up for a frosty pint and lively conversation.

There’s Peter, a retired videographer from Australia. There’s Kim, a seventy-something Englishman who works as an actor in Thai movies and TV shows. There’s Dennis and Katia, a young couple from Russia who just moved to Thailand. There’s a Scottish guy who owns a pie shop. A Polish brewmeister. It’s as eclectic a crowd as I’ve ever seen.

### An Eight-Town Interview Process

One newcomer to the group, like me, is Mike Esposito from San Francisco. Mike has been living on Pratumnak Hill for several months and couldn’t be happier.

During his working years, Mike traveled all over the world, and always knew he wanted to retire overseas. “Towards the end of my career, I was interviewing countries,” Mike said. “I spent a long weekend in Phuket about five years ago and knew Thailand was where I wanted to be.”

Mike described his “interview” process once he zeroed in on Thailand, and I was in awe of his discipline and planning. Rather than hop from location to location like a tourist, Mike charted a methodical and thorough course. He made a list of cities and towns he had researched and lived in each place for several months to get an impression of what it would be like to live there full-time.

Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Mae Rim, Koh Samui, Phuket, Hua Hin, Krabi, and Jomtien Beach all got their chance to be Mike’s new home. “I loved Chiang Mai,” Mike said. “But the air quality during the burning season (March and April) is unbearable. And I really prefer the beach to the mountains.”

Bangkok was too busy for Mike, and Hua Hin was too sleepy. “I almost chose Krabi,” he continued. “The beach, the southern Thai food, the mountains, and access to all those gorgeous islands... that’s what I came to Thailand for.” Mike said he couldn’t find a place to live close enough to the beach in Krabi, so he moved on to Pattaya.

“Pattaya is the only place I visited twice,” he said. “The first time I came to Pattaya I did it like a tourist, and only saw the infamous Walking Street and all that nonsense. I felt like the place had more to offer, so I came back and found what I was looking for. After one long walk down Jomtien Beach, I was hooked.”

Now Mike lives on Pratumnak Hill, and gets his exercise by walking down the hill to **Jomtien Beach**, stretching his range to several kilometers on the paved footpath under the coconut and acacia trees.

“This place ticks every box for me,” Mike said. “I rent a cool studio with a sea view for \$600 a month. I can walk to dozens of great restaurants, coffee shops, pubs, and music bars. I can hop on my motorbike and go shopping at a fantastic mall on the beach in Pattaya or cruise down the coast to Bang Sare and eat right-off-the-boat seafood.”

I asked Mike if he missed anything about the US so far. “Well, I *don’t* miss the

crazy politics and anxious people,” Mike said. “But even though I love Thai food, every time I walk by a sports bar on The Hill that’s playing an NFL game on the big screen, I have a longing for good old American chicken wings.”

One evening, Mike and I went to visit my friend Tommy Watson at his American soul food restaurant, [Kickin Chicken](#), 200 meters up The Hill. Southern fried chicken, collard greens, mac-n-cheese, and some of the best spicy wings I’ve ever had. I’m pretty sure it’s the only place in Pattaya where you can order breakfast tacos made with Jimmy Dean sausage.

### A Gathering of “The World’s Largest Fraternity”

Tommy is a retired US Army veteran originally from Washington, DC. He’s married to a bubbly Thai woman, and together with their daughter, they’ve created a little slice of America right on Pratumnak Hill.

A significant portion of American expats in Southeast Asia are former military and from several generations—I’ve met a lot of vets from the Iraq War and Afghanistan mess. I found Tommy’s restaurant through my next door neighbor in Jomtien, another US Army veteran. We’re like the world’s largest fraternity and our network is highly efficient... especially when it comes to food.

“I probably wouldn’t have been able to have my own restaurant back home,” Tommy said. “The expenses and all the government red tape aren’t worth the



trouble. But here, I was able to get up and running with a product I’m proud of and nobody else can offer.”

Tommy doesn’t miss much from the US, because he spent a lot of his military career outside the country and felt less at home there than overseas. “I’ve got people coming by my place from all over the world, with lots of Americans stopping by to visit. This restaurant might as well be my front porch. I get to chop it up with some great folks, so I still get the best part of America without having to live there.”

It was great to be invited into this neighborhood’s little circle of expats. And it’s heartwarming to meet Americans like me who find their way here to Thailand.

Kraig and his wife Jane (who own the Island Bar) are an adorable couple who’ve

**“There are a lot of places that are just better to live than America.”**

weathered the ups and downs of life in Pattaya together with big smiles and positive attitudes.

Kraig came to Thailand because, as he put it, “Runaway inflation, usurious taxation, and a hostile political environment isn’t something that just happened since the last election cycle. I wanted a better life and knew it wasn’t going to happen in California. I got offered a job in Thailand, so I got on the plane.”

Tommy knew his retirement check from the Army would stretch twice as far in Thailand as it would back home in DC. “I had plenty of choices for the next part of my life,” he said. “Now I run my own restaurant with my family and I make new friends on a weekly basis. I didn’t think this life was available to a guy like me in the US.”

Mike Esposito should write a book on how to become an expat. He did a lot of research. He had a meticulous plan. And, he had the patience to visit every place he thought would be a viable candidate for the next chapter in his life. “I’ve spent way too much time outside the US to ever consider moving back there permanently. I know it’s hard for Americans to hear, but there are a lot of places that are just better to live in.”

Watching what’s happening in America on the news can make me feel disconnected and out of touch sometimes. After 25 years in Thailand, I started wondering if I still have anything in common with Americans. Then I meet like-minded individuals like Kraig, Mike, and Tommy.

Kraig and I talked about music, old comic books, and real estate. Tommy and I talk about food, football, and our “glory days” in the military. Mike and I are the same age and can reflect on our circuitous paths to The Land of Smiles for several pints at a time.

Tommy is right... Americans are still the best thing about America... no matter where in the world you find them. ■

**Barton Walters** has lived and traveled throughout Thailand for 25 years, working as a real estate developer, a college professor, and a marketing executive. He’s published numerous articles about what it’s like to live in Southeast Asia.



Kraig and Jane, the faces of Island Bar in Pattaya.



Every American likes to think they're Irish. At least that's the joke in the world of residency visas and second passports.

The point being that many Americans are eager to find any way they can to gain easy access to a life in Europe.

Well, I am not Irish. (Actually, Ancestry.com says I kinda am—Northern Irish genes fertilize many of the branches on my family tree.)

I claim Dutch heritage because my last name is purely Dutch, from somewhere in east-central Netherlands—Gelderland, as it's known.

None of this is relevant except for the fact that when I was first looking to move to Europe in 2018, I briefly gave thought to Amsterdam. I'd been there on business a year earlier and really loved the place. It feels European in the best possible way, like the kind of place Santa Claus and the missus vacation before the busy Christmas toy-building season.

I even like the sometimes rotten and rainy weather. Plus, if there's any place on the planet where people are going to pronounce my surname correctly, it's the Netherlands.

Alas, I didn't find a way into the Netherlands in 2018. There were no digital nomad visas back then (and still none today).

But it turns out that I missed something—a treaty that the US signed with the Netherlands back in March 1956.

I suspect a lot of people looking for an easy path to a European residency visa miss this treaty opportunity, too...

### The World War II Secret that Opens Up Europe for Americans

So, let me tell you about the **Dutch American Friendship Treaty** (DAFT), part of the post-war Marshall plan designed to foster trade and economic development between the US and war-ravaged Holland.

A component of that treaty gives Americans the opportunity to apply for a Dutch residence permit by means of entrepreneurship.

Basically, start a business in Holland and it comes packaged with a two-year residency permit that's renewable. (Renewal, by the way, is for five years, after which you can apply for Dutch citizenship and a European Union passport, if you so wish.)



The Dutch American Friendship Treaty can offer an easy path to European residency.

## “Only Americans Need Apply”: A Secret Access Route to Europe

Jeff D. Opdyke

Don't let the word “entrepreneur” scare you off.

Yes, you have to be an entrepreneur, but that doesn't mean launching a brick-and-mortar business in Amsterdam or, say, a Philly cheesesteak food truck in Rotterdam. You can be a digital nomad running your online, freelance business from a gorgeous pied-a-terre overlooking the canals.

You just need to prove you have €4,500 (about \$4,800) in a Dutch bank to seed the business... and suddenly you're a *stroop-wafel*-eating Yank ambling Amsterdam, one of Europe's most beautiful cities. (Or wherever you want to live in the Netherlands, since the cost-of-living in the Dutch capital can be downright usurious.)

Costs aside, DAFT applicants over the years have pretty much seen a 100% success rate, according to numerous visa agencies in the Netherlands that advertise their treaty-application services online.

Thus, for anyone looking for a way into Europe, the Dutch American Friendship Treaty is, by my estimation, one of the best paths available because the cost is so minimal and the benefits so superior.

By benefits, I mean: DAFT visa recipi-

ents can bring into the Netherlands their partner (married or unmarried, same or different gender) and their minor children. Moreover, the partner and children (once of age) are allowed to work locally, without a visa. And the treaty allows the recipient and their family full access to Dutch healthcare, some of the very best healthcare on the planet.

You also benefit from the ability to move about the continent easily.

(Although, technically, as an American outside of Holland you're still bound by the Schengen rule that limits your time in the European Union to 90 days in every 180-day period.)

### The Netherlands Is “Real Europe” — Museums, Tulips, Baked Goods

Beyond all of that, I guess the biggest question people have is: Jeff, what's Holland really like?

In a word: Fantabulous.

I'm not stretching the truth here when I say that the Netherlands is one of my favorite places in Europe. I've taken the train and driven through parts of the country, and I've spent a good amount of time in Amsterdam.

Top to bottom, it's a lovely place to build a European life.

Amsterdam is as modern as modern can be, but wrapped in a veil of age that dates back nearly 750 years. Buildings here have that patina of "real Europe" that Americans love. Housing along the tree-lined canals is very Scandinavian. (Though the Dutch are not Scandinavian or Nordic and have no historic ties to that region.)

On a warm summer's evening, the trees are green, the bridges lit up, and the lights of canal-side houses and houseboats reflect off the calm water, central Amsterdam is as pretty as it gets for a major Western city.

The lifestyle here is uber-urban, but with easy access to all the Old World treats that make Europe such a wonderful place for Americans to live. Last year I was in Amsterdam for the better part of a week to attend a crypto conference, and I spent my free time wandering through farmers' markets and high-end, street-side food courts. For foodies, it's hard to beat Amsterdam because the place has become one of Europe's melting pots, reflected in diverse menu options. On that last trip, I ate everything from top-of-the-line sushi, to surprisingly good barbecue, to Holland's famous *pannenkoeken*, an overgrown love-child of American pancakes and French crepes.

The canal-side garden centers and tulip stalls I strolled through are packed with more tulip varieties than I ever would have imagined. The museums—particularly the modern-art [Stedelijk Museum](#)—are among the best in Europe, which you'd likely expect, given that Vermeer, Rembrandt, Mondrian, Van Gogh, and de Kooning, among others, were all Dutch.

Lifestyle here is very much centered around the outdoors, despite the weather, which can be quite cold and rainy—think Seattle, but in a snowy corner of Canada. Bikes are *everywhere*. Literally everywhere. And people are forever pedaling to and from work or the market or just for exercise, even in a downpour.

Subways will take you anywhere you need to go in Amsterdam or Rotterdam (the second-largest city after Amsterdam), and the train network across the country is expansive. Not much need for a car, really, unless you want to live outside of a city.

And, frankly, that's not a bad choice. The Dutch countryside is as bucolic

a place as I have ever seen. It's part Shire from *Lord of the Rings*, part Thomas Kinkade painting. Basically, the kind of place that makes you feel at peace.

Hmmm, I wonder if my wife would agree to move...

(By the way, she cut me off before I finished that sentence when I called her from Leiden, an absolutely gorgeous college town situated on the train line between The Hague and Amsterdam.)

Throughout the Dutch countryside, you regularly come upon the most picturesque canals lined with quaint wooden cottages and the quintessential windmills that Don Quixote

would have certainly tilted at. And the rows of expansive tulip fields make you mad that you're not a better photographer.

Because the country is so compact, living in the countryside doesn't mean you're far from the conveniences and entertainment of big-city living. Amsterdam, near the North Sea in the west, to Nijmegen, near the German border in the east, is just 90 minutes.

However...

### Europe's 4th Most Expensive Country

As I alluded to several paragraphs back, Holland isn't the cheapest place on the planet. Actually, it's one of the most expensive countries in Europe, relative to the EU average. [VisualCapitalist.com](#) ranks the Netherlands as 22% pricier than the continent as a whole, in 4th position behind Luxembourg, Ireland, and Denmark—and that might temper some people's enthusiasm for access to a quick residence visa and that fantabulous lifestyle.

In the core of Amsterdam, you're looking at half a million dollars to buy a nice two-bedroom, one-bath apartment along one of the canals. Although, lovely two- and three-bedroom apartments in the heart of the city rent for \$900 to about \$1,800 per month, which isn't bad at all.

Off the canals, prices to buy a place drop by a couple tens of thousands, and rents are a few hundred dollars cheaper.

Of course, if you want a stand-alone, single-family house, you'll spend a million dollars, easily.

Out in the Dutch countryside, prices are cheaper, as you'd expect, but not radically so. A very cute, newly remodeled mid-century modern brick bungalow with two bedrooms and a bath, spread across 600 square feet on a quarter acre surrounded by forestland and lakes, is less than \$290,000. Other country properties range from \$350,000 to well into the millions.

At this point, I've traveled across most of Europe—35 countries—and several stand apart for various reasons. The Netherlands is one of them, and not only because my heritage dates back to 16th-century Holland.

The Netherlands is a very comfortable country. Easy to get around. Easy to blend in like a local. Easy to communicate with everyone because everyone speaks English as a second language. The housing stock

is appealing. The lifestyle is appealing (if pricey). And anything you'd want as a consumer is readily available. Plus there's the superior medical care, which at about €1,400 per year on average (\$1,500) is pretty darn affordable relative to the US.

About the only downside is that you have to like cold and rainy weather during long parts of the year. And you'll probably struggle to convince a doctor you need antibiotics unless you've stopped breathing an hour earlier. Kind of a joke... kind of not. (That's based on my experience trying to get antibiotics anywhere in Europe. I've actually resorted to stocking up while in Mexico.)

If you're looking for an easy path to European residency, and you can find a way to be entrepreneurial as a freelancer/digital nomad, the little-known Dutch American Friendship Treaty might very well be your best way to tilt at your very own windmills in person. ■



**Jeff D. Opdyke** is *IL's* expert on personal finance and investing overseas, and editor of *The Global Intelligence Letter*. Based in Portugal, he spent 17 years at *The Wall Street Journal*. His free e-letter, *Field Notes*, is full of great financial advice. [Sign up here](#).





Ted Baumann has been to over 90 countries. Here are his key insights for would-be global citizens... so you can learn them the easy way.

# Four Lessons I've Learned from Four Decades as a Global Citizen

Ted Baumann

I was born with a bad case of wanderlust.

As a kid, I'd ride miles on my bicycle from my farm home outside Easton, Maryland. With my first car, a decrepit VW hatchback, I'd wander all over the Eastern Shore, visiting friends, courting girls, hunting and fishing with my pals, and doing anything else that could get me on the road.

After high school, I kicked around for a couple of years in the States. But I dreaded the thought of a "normal" life. As soon as the opportunity presented itself, away I went overseas.

Four decades later, I'm a dual citizen of the US and South Africa, with homes in both and a career that's led me to nearly 90 countries. I'm currently back with my family in our seaside village south of Cape Town, and couldn't be happier.

Shakespeare said the course of true love never did run smooth... and that's been the case with my global journey, too.

I want to share some of the key lessons I've learned as a global citizen. Some are positive... and some flag pitfalls awaiting anyone unprepared.

## No. 1: Use Head and Heart When Making a Big Move

I'm fortunate. The first country I visited as a young man was and still is a perfect fit for me. Despite South Africa's troubled history, from the moment I set foot here I knew this was a society and culture that suited me to a T. By now, I've become fully "South Africanized."

Not everyone is as lucky. Many travel from country to country looking for the right place. That's as it should be if you're a wanderluster, of course. But it's important to define the "right place" as one that "speaks" to you as a person.

Sure, the view from the condo on the hill overlooking the ocean is spectacular, but do you like the locals? Do you get their sense of humor? Are you comfortable with the way people interact?

I've met plenty of Europeans who adore South Africa's natural beauty but wouldn't want to live here permanently. They're not as relaxed as the locals with their loose, jokey, "we'll figure something

out" attitude.

On the other hand, I worry about people who focus on the bells and whistles that come with a particular foreign destination, without thinking through what it would be like to *be there* on a long-term basis.

[This article I wrote last month](#) is a case

in point. Many people are excited about residency in Dubai... but the average western retiree probably wouldn't enjoy the place. Not only is it expensive, they'd be caught between the hedon-

istic expat culture and the conservative Islamic society that surrounds it.

Find the place where your heart is happy.

**"Find the place where your heart is happy."**

## No. 2: Options = Wealth

When I say "wealth," I'm not talking about hard assets. I'm talking about choices. Diversifying internationally has vastly increased my own... something of tremendous value to me.

Nobel Prize-winning Indian economist Amartya Sen said poverty wasn't really about money. It was about how much

control people have over their lives. Even people with small incomes can live well if they can achieve their goals in life.

The reverse is also true. Having lots of money didn't help people stuck in the US during the COVID lockdowns. Although I didn't, I could have signed up for repatriation flights from the US to South Africa. That option came from the fact that I'd decided to become a dual citizen... not because I have deep pockets.

That's why I always recommend that people pursue the most secure form of foreign residency they can get and seek citizenship as soon as it's available to them. I'm always amazed at people who buy property, build extensive relationships, and otherwise root themselves in countries on the basis of 90-day visa runs. If you really love a place that much, become a resident, and eventually, a citizen.

Long-term expats will tell you the same thing: they feel "wealthier" and more secure because they've created options for themselves.

### No. 3: Keep the Money Flow Unclogged

While drafting this article, I got an email from my local bank:

*We tried to contact you by phone and email to discuss your foreign tax obligations. However, we have been unable to get a hold of you. We have also sent you an email advising of the requirements and information we need. As a result of non-submission of the requested information we are left with no alternative but to lock your accounts.*

The bit about them trying to contact me was garbage. It's just a boilerplate email. But the threat of losing access to my money was real.

Like most long-term expats, I recommend that anybody living abroad keep as much money in local bank accounts as they can. Particularly for Americans, the threat typically comes from the US side. Many friends and colleagues have suddenly lost access to their US bank accounts because the bank found out they were living abroad. Without money in a local bank, you could find yourself facing a severe problem.

My case was also a result of US issues.

**"Pursue the most secure form of foreign residency you can get."**

The US government has forced all other countries to accept its reporting requirements for US citizens living abroad. As a dual citizen, my bank is compelled by South African law to confirm my US tax status. All they needed was a W9 form—which they'd never asked me for—and

when I gave it to them, everything was fine.

Most *IL* readers who consult with me are close to or in retirement. For that reason, they don't have the option of cutting their financial links to their home country completely. Social

Security and pension payments are either going to come directly to their foreign bank account, or they're going to go into a US bank account for later transfer. Either way, the issues that my colleagues and I have experienced need to be addressed.

The first step is to ensure that your US bank knows that you're a resident abroad. Many US banks won't serve non-resident clients, whether they're citizens or not. But some do. Before you move abroad, ask them directly whether they will or won't. If not, find one that will.

The second is to recognize that strict rules apply to investment brokerage companies, preventing them from serving non-resident clients,

even citizens. If you have money in a brokerage and intend to keep it there, ask them the same question you asked your bank. If you don't, you can face the unpleasant situation of having access to your accounts blocked, preventing you from selling losing positions and buying winners.

The third is to make sure you clearly understand the financial rules in your new country. South Africa's Foreign Intelligence Center Act is what tripped me up this time... that's the one that forces South African banks to gather information from US taxpayers who do business with them.

I would strongly recommend that you keep as much cash as you can on hand abroad in the event that financial flows from the US are disrupted for any reason. My wife and I have accounts at three different banks, so if one raises issues about

our US tax status, the others are available. I'd recommend any long-term expat do the same.

### No. 4: Don't Take Anything for Granted

This is closely related to the previous two lessons. Just because things have worked one way for a long time doesn't mean they always will. Circumstances can change, rapidly.

I've already given one example on the financial front. If you're a US citizen, you've got to keep an eye on the regulatory environment in the States and in your new country. The same goes for your residency status.

Over the years I've heard plenty of stories about people who built lives for themselves on the shakiest of platforms. There was the guy who built a business in Bali teaching tourists how to surf. He built a house for himself, acquired a local girlfriend, and otherwise centered his life on the island. But on one of his regular visa runs to Singapore, he was denied reentry to Indonesia because he was clearly abusing his tourist status.

Admittedly, that's low hanging fruit as far as residency lessons go. But unexpected changes can apply to other forms of residency as well. For example, when I first came to South Africa in the late 1980s,

I applied for and received a student visa. Unexpectedly, its renewal was refused by a bureaucrat who didn't like the idea of foreigners studying at South African universities. I managed to pull some strings to get it sorted out, but that incident prompted me to

apply for permanent residency as soon as I was able.

Particularly for people living abroad on digital nomad visas, rules can change unexpectedly, especially after elections when the ruling party changes. Anyone looking to gain residency through investment needs to act quickly. ■

**"Many US banks won't serve non-resident clients, whether they're citizens or not."**



**Ted Baumann** is *IL*'s [Global Diversification Expert](#), focused on strategies to expand your investments, lower your taxes, and preserve your wealth overseas.





Whatever you picture as the perfect setting for your retirement, chance are you'll find it in Panama, this year's Index winner.

# The Best Places in the World to Retire in 2025

Stephanie Reed

Before I came into the *International Living* fold, “retirement” was a four-letter word. That dreaded time in life when all I’d have to look forward to was a 20-minute shuffle to the mailbox to collect my Social Security check. Maybe the neighbor’s dog would wander over and pee on my polyester pants, adding some excitement to the day.

The reality is, few Americans today can afford to retire on Social Security alone. The cost of living in the US has exploded, led by healthcare and housing. “A \$100 dollar bill back in 2000 has the buying power of just 54 bucks today,” says *IL* Personal Finance Expert Jeff Opdyke, “and that was a period of mild inflation.”

The average American pays \$300 a month in utilities. The average price of a new house? Upwards of \$500,000. And the great American staple, peanut butter, costs 40% more than it did just four years ago.

Going forward, inflation is broadly

expected to worsen, putting an idyllic and leisurely retirement even further from reach. It’s no surprise Americans report their biggest fear is not having a nest egg large enough to cover their remaining life expectancy.

But here at *IL*, we have a solution: Go abroad. When you do—to the right places—you won’t have to scale back your retirement plans, absorbing the spiraling costs of North American living. Instead, you can watch your lifestyle expand.

Every month, *International Living* brings you news, reports, expat stories, and practical solutions about relocating overseas. We aim to inspire you, entertain you, and answer your questions.

Once a year, we do something extra. ***IL*’s Annual Global Retirement Index** is a tool we offer you—and to an extent, the ticket you need—to create the overseas life of your dreams. In the right places, it really is possible to live better for less. And this Index is designed to help you

find the place that’s the best fit for you.

It could be that you want more sunshine in your life, or the chance to swim in a warm ocean year-round. Perhaps you dream of starting a new business, growing your own food, or living more holistically. *IL* contributor Ben Morris achieved all three... by purchasing a 53-acre farm in Costa Rica (for \$175,000).

Maybe your dream is no longer needing a car, or living in a sophisticated, cosmopolitan city where you’ll never get bored—but you won’t need four housemates to afford it. Or maybe, you simply long for a laidback life beachcombing on a tropical Caribbean island.

The thing is, it’s your retirement, so you get to decide what it should be like. You can struggle on, living exactly how you’re living now for the rest of your life, or you can make your retirement the best, most enjoyable, and most comfortable stage of your life...

## INTERNATIONAL LIVING'S 2025 GLOBAL RETIREMENT INDEX

Country	Housing	Visas/Benefits	Cost of Living	Affinity Rating	Development/ Governance	Climate	Healthcare	Average
Panama	77	98	80	86	86	79	82	84
Portugal	64	75	79	96	93	88	92	83.9
Costa Rica	66	94	74	86	82	82	89	81.9
Mexico	74	89	84	77	80	86	80	81.4
France	68	77	65	82	86	83	88	78.4
Spain	64	78	75	86	88	70	86	78.1
Malaysia	76	61	95	64	80	72	82	75.7
Greece	68	71	79	79	78	72	82	75.6
Italy	64	66	80	88	76	70	84	75.4
Thailand	60	60	97	80	79	72	74	74.6
Colombia	64	68	98	61	60	87	83	74.4
Ecuador	72	84	90	59	50	87	79	74.4
Malta	62	60	75	68	84	63	82	70.6
Uruguay	62	64	70	70	82	58	81	69.6
Ireland	56	66	56	76	90	58	81	69.0
Vietnam	50	40	96	66	70	74	82	68.3
Bali	52	60	94	60	68	68	70	67.4
Montenegro	60	56	79	70	68	78	60	67.3
Roatán	56	77	74	57	64	60	56	63.4
Belize	48	66	73	73	56	66	52	62.0

### Boundless Opportunities to Take Back Control

For 45 years, *International Living* has been researching what makes a great retirement location. And with more and more individuals working remotely—and 66 countries now offering “digital nomad” visas—you don’t have to wait for retirement to live better.

We’ve found places where the climate is comfortable year-round, and where the cost of living is more affordable than anywhere in North America. We’ve found locales with communities of like-minded expats who made the move before you, and who can get you involved and connected from the moment you arrive. Places where healthcare that’s as good as—or better than—anything you’d get in the US or Canada, costs a fraction of the price. Or, it’s even free (no exaggeration).

We’ve found the spots around the globe that offer you all that: places where you can buy a comfortable three-bedroom, two-bathroom home for under \$150,000, or rent one for less than \$800 a month. Our editors and correspondents are on the lookout, year-round, for emerging destinations that hit all the right notes... where you can look around

and truly say to yourself, “This is so much better than what I could have had back home.”

And we never stop looking. Oloron-Sainte-Marie in France, Caminha in Portugal, and Volcán in Panama are just three wonderful, under-the-radar retirement destinations our on-the-ground experts have reported on over the last year.

We also sent our correspondents out to revisit spots we already knew were top picks, such as Samara and Nosara in Costa Rica. Why? Because it’s important to be sure that the places that were once attractive retirement locations remain attractive locations.

Today, 65 really is the new 45. Thanks to the stories in these pages, I envision retirement as an era of freedom... when I’ll join fellow expats in the joys of slow-travel, exploring where the wind carries me for several months at a time. Or, I’ll live year-round in one of the many countries that make up *IL*’s annual Index...

This year, we’ve listed 20 countries in the world where you can afford all the rich offerings of a global life. Places drenched in natural beauty, with top-notch (and lower-cost) healthcare, long-term residency options, and modern amenities.

In a few moments, I’ll introduce you to the top spots in Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia for 2025. And explain how we picked them. But by nature of our evaluation process, any country on our Index is a worthy contender for a dream retirement—or living and working abroad.

### No. 1 in Latin America and Overall Winner: Panama

*“Panama checks every box on my list... from beauty and warmth to safety and stability. I love my straightforward, “what you see is what you get” Panamanian friends—the kind of people who become family.”*

—Jess Ramesch

Chances are, whatever you picture when you close your eyes and think of the perfect setting for your retirement—a fast-paced eclectic city, a palm-fringed beach, or a forested valley where the temperature is spring-like all year—you’ll find it in Panama.

This Central American country packs a lot into its small area. But what makes it truly special is its Pensionado program. To entice retirees to the country (you read



## HOW WE COMPILE THE ANNUAL GLOBAL RETIREMENT INDEX

For our 2025 Annual Global Retirement Index, we've used seven categories to carefully determine the best locations in the world for retirement. Our focus is on the destinations that make sense for an overseas retirement—the established expat hubs with a track record for comfortable living. For instance, Roatán is the only place in Honduras we would consider in our ranking, while in Mexico there are easily a half-a-dozen hotspots we've homed in on. Each place is then assessed in the following ways:

**Housing:** This category looks first at the ease of buying and owning property as a foreigner, then the value you'll receive as a homeowner. We consider factors like the price of housing in expat-friendly locations and property taxes.

We also examine rental values. In many destinations, renting makes better financial sense than buying. We look at long-term leases, the cost of renting a two-bedroom, 900-square-foot furnished apartment in a mid-range area, and whether renters' rights are well protected by law.

**Visas and Benefits:** A place isn't much good as a retirement destination if you can't live there easily. We begin with an analysis of available tourist visas: how fast/simple it is to obtain a tourist visa, the ease of exploring a country on a tourist visa, the length of a tourist visa, etc.

In 2023, for example, Costa Rica began issuing 180-day tourist visas as standard. That's almost six months' worth of hassle-free time in-country, and more than enough time to escape the ravages of the North American winter. For retirees who live overseas part-time, that's plenty.

But we also investigate the legalities of extending a stay, the ease of becoming a

permanent resident, and the availability of special retiree options. We additionally consider retiree benefits and discounts on healthcare, prescription medication, entertainment, eating out, travel, utilities, and local transport.

**Cost of Living:** Each of our contributors answers an extensive cost-of-living questionnaire, tailored to the needs and wants of an expat retiree, from the cost of rent and utilities to groceries to a flight home to visit family in North America.

The lower the cost of living, the higher the score.

**Affinity Rating:** This one is where gut feeling comes in. We pride ourselves on being systematic in the way we put the Index together—but the truth is, retiring in a new destination involves the heart as well as the head. So, we ask our experts to rank our destinations according to whether they'd be happy to move there. What's more, we ask you—our readers—where you would like to move.

For example, how easy will it be to make friends? We find out by evaluating the size and character of the expat community, the number of clubs and activities, and whether or not English is widely spoken. We also rate the range and variety of restaurants, the ease of finding an English-language movie, a concert, a world-class sporting event... essentially, the ability for you to have a thriving social life as an overseas retiree.

**Healthcare:** We assess healthcare based on both quality and cost. In many of the world's best retirement destinations—and all of those included in the index—you'll find world-class care far cheaper than back home.

The quality and affordability of Portugal's healthcare system, for example, is one of the biggest draws to life there. It's one of the reasons this country consistently ranks high on

our Index (it comes in at No. 2 for 2025).

Terry Coles and her husband took a housesit in Portugal in 2018, and decided it was the country they wanted to call home. "We have access to both public and private healthcare, along with reasonably priced private insurance," they say. The couple pays around \$550 a month total for private insurance, which includes coverage for up to 60 days of travel outside Portugal. "Compared to what we were paying in the US," Terry says, "this is an incredible deal."

**Development and Governance:** If the roads are good and clean, the public transport excellent, and the internet fast and reliable, then a place will rank highly. We additionally factor in whether your new home offers a stable political environment, well-maintained infrastructure, and an efficient banking system.

**Climate:** This is our "Goldilocks" category. For some folks the perfect climate is hot and humid, others want spring year round... So, how do we score somewhere like Roatán—a small Caribbean island with a tropical climate—next to, say, Ireland? Apples to oranges, right?

We score a destination based on how many different climate options it offers. Ecuador's landscape ranges from permanent snowfields, to cool mountain retreats, to tropical rainforest, to arid coastal plains reminiscent of southern California. In the Andes highlands, in Cuenca at 8,000 feet, it's cool.

Belize, by contrast, has tropical warmth year-round, but that's all. For that reason, Ecuador scores higher than Belize. (That said, maybe you love tropical warmth year-round... If so, Belize might be just right for you.)

that correctly—Panama really does want you to come), the Pensionado visa is the perfect option, as you can qualify with a lifetime pension (Social Security counts) of at least \$1,000 a month.

That's a relatively low bar to entry on the income side. But life in Panama just costs less. Especially when you look at the country's benefits and discounts for seniors (another Index category that Panama aced). A full quarter is knocked

off the price of your electricity and phone bills, just to help out. You pay half-price for entertainment, from movies to symphonies, and if you choose to head out for a meal as part of your evening, you'll get 25% knocked off the price. The same goes for domestic airfares—25% off. Best of all, you'll get 20% off the (already affordable) price of medical services.

All this just adds to Panama's excellent cost of living. With around \$2,400

a month, a couple can live comfortably in this expat-friendly haven, and that includes regular meals out, entertainment, and living expenses. What's more, it's close to home, and well-served with direct flights. You could be back in the US for a quick visit within three hours. It's no surprise that Panama is already an established expat favorite.

In towns such as Boquete, Pedasí, Coronado, and David, expats have done

the pioneering work already, meaning you'll integrate quickly... and always have like-minded types to socialize with. "There was no shortage of entertainment," says Nanette Witmer of her life in David. "First-run movies in English, a roller-skating rink in nearby Boquete, plenty of concerts. Expats also gather at each other's homes for barbecues, pot-lucks, and social hours."

As Nanette points out, it's easy to join clubs or informal groups, whether it's for a game of pickleball or a potluck dinner party, and the locals like to meet foreigners. You'll be helping them practice their English or developing your own skills by learning some Spanish. Either way, exchanges are friendly, open, and curious.

Our expat contributors in Panama all agree that healthcare is top quality. Whether it's at the Johns Hopkins International-affiliate Pacífica Salud hospital in Panama City or one of the other five major hospitals across the city, care is first-rate.

More than that, though, it's personalized and unhurried. When

doctors in Panama ask how you are, they really care about the answer.

Expat Jim Gault can vouch for the high level of care he and his wife, Abbe, have received in Panama since they moved to Pedasí, on the country's west coast. When Jim had to consult a cardiologist, the care he received was, in his own words, "top notch." But that's not what impressed Jim most. It was the fact that the doctor spoke excellent English, was willing to discuss a care plan and medication options, and, best of all, gave Jim his cellphone number, with the instruction to call him at any time if he wasn't feeling right.

That's the sort of personal touch that seems simple, but it made all the difference to Jim and Abbe: "He gave me something my wife and I desperately needed to help with our fears: hope and confidence." You'd expect that sort of unhurried care to be expensive, but that's not the case at all. Jim got an electrocardiogram, consultation, prescription, and care plan, and it certainly didn't break the bank. "Total cost for the visit and EKG, with Pensionado discount, was \$120. Now, that's an excellent health-care experience

at a fraction of US prices."

At those rates, you can pay over the counter for all but the most complicated procedures. But if you choose to take out health insurance, that's not expensive, either. It's pretty standard to find expats in Panama paying not much over \$3,000 a year for coverage, with a deductible of just \$250. For similar coverage in the US, it would cost them \$15,000 a year or more.

That's a substantial savings to any budget, leaving more money for fun. (Particularly when you add the savings on property tax—typically just 0.5% of the home's value—or the fact that Panama charges no tax on any income you make outside its borders.) And if you're looking for fun, Panama delivers that in abundance.

Sunshine is year-round, with a mild, tropical climate that means you can get out in the open any day of the year and never worry about ice, snow, or even hurricanes. Yes, Panama sits below the hurricane zone—a big plus if the beach life appeals to you.

Two ocean coastlines flank the country and are only 50 miles apart at their closest point. If you're into hiking, bird-watching, fishing (the sport-fishing is excellent), or warm-water sea sports, you couldn't choose a better spot. Panama's surf breaks are among the best and most consistent in the world.

### Panama City Comes Into Its Own

*"Panama City is never boring. You're in a cosmopolitan city... but the jungle's right there. The ocean's right there."*

—Jess Ramesch

If your idea of fun centers more around bright lights and metropolitan thrills, it doesn't get much better than buzzy, electric Panama City.

"I just went to an extravagant speak-easy with a \$0 cover charge for live jazz and salsa. The next day I took a \$3.10 Uber to a taproom for live classic rock—again, no cover charge—and spent just \$18 on snacks and a flight of five craft beers," says Jess Ramesch, *IL* Panama Editor.

In 2022, Jess moved from the city to the beach town of Coronado, roughly

an hour away. But she returns to the city regularly for an injection of art, culture, and fabulous dining. Later in this month's issue, she details how Panama City has fully blossomed... living up to the early promise of its location and infrastructure projects.

Everything you could want is now on offer in this glamorous city... and you don't need much money to enjoy it.

"PTY, as city-slickers like to call the capital," Jess says, "has a skyline and promenades that compete with the likes of Singapore and Hong Kong. Even *Architectural Digest* has finally gotten the message—this year PTY was included in its list of 'The 17 Most Beautiful Skylines in the World.'"

These are all the reasons Panama tops *International Living's* 2025 Annual Global Retirement Index. It truly has everything you could need for a healthy, fulfilled, and happy retirement.

Also worthy of note in Latin America is Ecuador (No.13), where those who love sweater weather can enjoy it year-round in low-cost expat towns like Cuenca, a lovely historic retreat nestled in the Andes mountains at 8,000 feet.

There's also much buzz about Uruguay, which slides in at No. 15 this year (see sidebar, *Calm in a Chaotic World*), and of course, there's Mexico...

### Mexico is Like Living in the US... For Half the Price

*"Mexico has surpassed all my expectations. Even after eight years of living here, the culture and warmth of the people enrich me daily."*

—Bel Woodhouse

From the lofty mountains of the interior to the rolling waves off Cabo San Lucas on the Pacific coast, the huge country of Mexico offers a spot for nearly every taste... and the best weather in the world. (If it's too hot for you by the beach, try the highlands. Lake Chapala's residents claim they have the world's best climate, with abundant sunshine and temperatures averaging 77 F year-round.)

In Cozumel, Bel Woodhouse, *IL* Mexico Correspondent rents a small one-bedroom apartment three blocks from the waterfront in a nice neighborhood—for \$500 a month. A two-bed, two-bath

**"A couple can live comfortably on \$2,400 in this expat-friendly haven."**



## CALM IN A CHAOTIC WORLD

Expats who move to Uruguay often give the same reasons for coming... Its political, social, and economic stability.

This “tiny” nation, sandwiched between Brazil and Argentina (Buenos Aires is about an hour by ferry; Brazil is a 4.5-hour drive), has an educated populace, top-notch healthcare, and is rich in farmland you can buy for as little as \$2,000 an acre. Plus, it has excellent infrastructure and is among the safest countries in Latin America.

I scouted Uruguay earlier this year, and I have to say, if you’ve ever felt yourself drowning in a sea of bad news—political, racial, and religious divisions, gun violence, wars abroad—Uruguay feels blessedly quiet. It’s considered the “Switzerland of South America.”

While most expats live in the bustling, romantic capital of **Montevideo** along the southern coast, there are many options for those who want to truly disconnect and live off-grid... You can disappear into the heartland where the *gauchos* (cowboys) live, or stake your claim on the long, windswept coastline.

While Uruguay is a small country, it offers expats a diversity of lifestyle options: old colonial cities, sparkling beach resorts, and a world-class capital.

**Montevideo** is for city lovers. Here the country’s European colonial roots are on display with classic architecture, café-lined squares, museums, and more. You’ll never be stuck for something to do, with tango classes, theaters, and cool bars with live music.

If you prefer postcard-worthy beaches, yachting, and the finer things in life, **Punta del Este** is a must-see. It’s a renowned vacation destination (and property market) and a university town, with miles of sandy beaches and sapphire blue waters, along



© IVO DE ROOIJ/STOCK

In peaceful Uruguay, you’ll find old colonial cities, sparkling beach resorts, and a world-class capital, Montevideo. We suggest tango lessons.

with ultra-chic nightclubs and elegant beach-side restaurants.

Then there’s the department of **Rocha**, home to miles of quiet, pristine beaches framed by dunes and stunning rocky outcrops... or **Salto**, with its bustling waterfront and *termas* (hot springs resorts)... and Interior towns like **Tacuarembó**, where working gauchos continue to preserve and share their centuries-old horseback culture and traditions.

There are so many different sides to Uruguay, where you can live very simply or very sumptuously on the coasts, in the city, or in the vast, rural interior that produces so much food, the country has become a food-security and livestock-management icon.

The people of Uruguay are mostly of European descent, but Uruguayan culture is anything but a facsimile from the Old World. You’ll see rich traditions on display everywhere you go, from the milongas of the tango halls to the long, serene boardwalks to the farm-filled countryside. And people here are unfailingly, uncommonly kind. There’s a prevailing culture of calm—peace and tranquility are

valued here, as are the kind of manners that make outsiders feel welcome. Just about everyone you interact with will be willing to talk to you and offer help if you need it.

Plus Uruguay makes it easy to stay... As our Global Diversification Expert Ted Baumann says, “After arriving in the country, simply go to an immigration office and announce your intention to become a resident. Once you’ve filled out the paperwork, you can stay until it is processed.”

Uruguay has no immigration quotas, and rarely rejects applications unless the requirements of a monthly income of between \$1,500 (individual) and \$2,000 (couple) aren’t met. (The refusal rate is around 3%.)

In times of uncertainty, Uruguay is a notoriously stable, highly developed egalitarian country with excellent residency and second passport programs, along with enviable track records for safety and food security. Small wonder it’s where the smart money is heading.

—Jess Ramesch

near the beach starts at around \$1,000 a month. Further inland, you can rent the same apartment for about \$700 a month.

In Playa del Carmen, a 30-minute ferry ride away, prices are similar. (Turn to *Where to Go for Low-Cost Luxury on Mexico’s Caribbean Coast* to learn why expats are flocking to Playa.)

Bel also appreciates Mexico’s cheap

and abundant fruits and vegetables, and that she can still get all of her “comfort brands” from home. Imported goods cost more, she says, but it’s easy to live a higher quality of life on a budget. “Everything is more affordable, so I can dine out more and travel more.”

But here’s the most obvious advantage of living in Mexico: It’s really close. And

because it’s just over the border, you can find home comforts in just about any medium-sized town or city.

English is widely spoken in expat centers and vacation destinations, and US foods, products, sports, and movies are popular. Combined, it all adds up to one of the easiest destinations in the world to settle into expat living, with seamless

options for visiting home.

In historical highland cities, you'll find world-class cultural attractions, such as the International Cervantes Festival of dance, theater, film, opera, and literature in Guanajuato, set against a backdrop of colonial architecture, some of which dates back to the Spanish settlement in the 16th century.

San Miguel de Allende, also dating from colonial times, was a popular option for ex-servicemen studying fine art in the years following World War II. The GI Bill, which made that cultural interchange possible, is partly responsible for San Miguel's reputation as an artsy, freewheeling expat hub of the Americas.

Then there's Oaxaca, a historic city also known for its artisans, but especially for its outstanding culinary scene (see sidebar, Three Regions, Three Culinary Capitals).

Whether you're a culture vulture or not, there's a liberating energy to places where artistic merit is celebrated. It's a refreshing change from the high-stress, high-pace attitude that pervades much of the US and Canada.

## No. 1 in Europe: Portugal

*"Welcome to California east. Way, way east. Or maybe Puget Sound east. Maybe even Colorado or the Smoky Mountains east..."*

*"In other words, Welcome to Portugal, a tiny little country that packs some of the most diverse landscapes in all of Europe into its borders."*

—Jeff Opdyke

Once again, Portugal is our top-performing European country, coming in at second place in our Index overall.

If the continent of Europe feels attractively Old World, the warm coastal nation of Portugal, on Europe's far southwest edge, feels older still. This is a country of church bells ringing out over centuries-old vineyards, of cobblestone streets leading to outdoor farmers markets, and cafés bustling with unhurried conviviality.

Those are some of the romantic reasons why Portugal scores highest among our European countries, but you can't live on romance alone. Luckily, there

are a host of compelling practical reasons to consider Portugal for a European retirement. Its climate is mild year-round, with an average of 72 F and summer highs around 85 F.

The cost of living is among the lowest in Western Europe, with a restaurant lunch, including wine, often coming in at around \$10 per person, and a coffee at a pavement café is less than a dollar. "Expats typically find their expenses in Portugal run about one-third of what they were in the States, and you can live a comfortable lifestyle from about \$2,500 a month," says *IL* contributor Tricia Pimental.

"I had an espresso, cappuccino, and a *pastel de nata* at breakfast this morning in a mall for a little over \$6," Jeff Opdyke tells me. "And that's in a mall, where it's more expensive."

Jeff pays just over \$200 a month for private insurance for a family of three. He has state coverage too, which he says is good, but since you have to wait for many procedures, most expats go with a private plan.



Portugal's "affinity" rating is the highest on our Index. It's a place many want to live for its affordability, warmth, and beauty.



English is taught in schools in Portugal, so you'll find plenty of people who speak it, especially in cities and in the Algarve—an area popular with expats due to its sunny climate and pristine beaches.

Until recently, expats could take advantage of Portugal's low-cost residency-by-investment visa, or Golden Visa, by making a relatively modest real estate investment. That program, along with tax incentives, was designed to encourage foreign investment and boost Portugal's economy. Expats began flocking to the country in droves... so much so that Portugal, like other European countries, has since rolled back its liberal Golden Visa policy. (A key reason being that housing prices have risen beyond the means of many locals.)

Jeff lives with his family in Lisbon. And Portugal's Non-Habitual Resident (NHR) tax program was the primary reason for his move. The California-like weather, and proximity to the sea, were secondary reasons.

"Because of the way I structured my income through an LLC," Jeff says, "my local tax rate is 0%, meaning my annual global tax rate, including the US, is between 8% and 11% after accounting for business deductions."

Unfortunately, you can no longer do what Jeff did. Many expats like Jeff were grandfathered into the NHR program, which offered significant tax savings on foreign-source pensions. But "NHR 2.0" takes a different approach. Instead of tax relief for foreign-source pensions, expats can get exemptions on foreign-source capital gains. In sum, NHR 2.0 is designed to attract professionally active individuals looking to grow their wealth and bring their expertise to the country, rather than retirees looking for relaxation in their golden years.

These changes help to keep Portugal out of our No. 1 spot on the Index. But the country's "affinity rating," which takes "the heart" into account as much as the numbers, locks this beloved expat haven in at No. 2.

## Where Expats are Finding Value in France

France is the second-highest ranking European country this year, and sixth on our Index overall. It gets high marks for healthcare, governance, and affinity too—and I imagine its cuisine plays no small part in that (see sidebar, *Three Regions, Three Culinary Capitals*).

Recently, we reported on two new lesser-known retirement destinations in Southwestern France, Oloron-Sainte-Marie and Pau.

Expats Mykle and Doug Flatley joke that they're the "unofficial ambassadors" of Oloron-Sainte-Marie (OSM), their new hometown nestled in the foothills of the Pyrenees. In a few short years, they've persuaded other expats to move to the region. And we understand why...

OSM's *centre-ville* (town center) is quintessential France, dotted with townhouses adorned with slate rooftops, pastel shutters, and flower boxes. Lush green mountains

frame the town, which has centuries-old churches, a history museum housed in a chalet-like villa, and a weekly open-air market.

"Oloron-Sainte-Marie is so pretty, with such varied neighborhoods, that I love to simply walk around. We can be in Spain in less than an hour, Biarritz in 90 minutes—but I prefer to be here," says Mykle.

"Almost everything we need on a daily basis is found on our street... a *boulangerie* (bakery), a butcher shop, a cheese shop, a bookstore, the cathedral, restaurants, a bar, a bank... and a farmers market by the cathedral on Sundays."

The couple's original plan was to rent here for the first year. "We wanted to be sure that France was all we wanted it to be, and be sure that this was the right area for us," Mykle explains. "But when we saw our current home—which Doug had found online—it was a *coup de coeur* (love at first sight), so we decided we'd just buy it instead of renting." The couple say that back in 2021, they paid €116,000 for the 1,000-square-foot apartment, plus €9,600 for closing costs.

Home to about 11,000 people,

OSM is about 20 miles from Pau, "[The Paris of the Pyrenees](#)," a provincial yet cosmopolitan city of 75,000 with a growing expat population. For centuries, Pau was a major trading hub and rest stop for pilgrims on their trek to the great cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.

IL contributor Amy Maroney reported on Pau earlier this year. "The city has it all: proximity to mountains and beaches, affordable living, a pleasant climate, friendly locals, great food. Its gorgeous heart includes the medieval Château de Pau, the seat of the Navarran kingdom from 1512 to 1620, and now beautifully restored for history buffs."

Pau is also a jumping-off point for outdoor enthusiasts who can't get enough of the mountains. And as the home of the University of Pau and Pays de l'Adour (with more than 13,000 students), it has all the benefits of a thriving university town, including myriad cultural offerings.

Mykle and Doug belong to a regional Facebook group, [Ex-Pats, Pau Pyrenees](#). And Mykle shares insights about life in this region in a Facebook series he's dubbed [Foreigner in France](#).

## No. 1 in Southeast Asia: Malaysia

"Malaysia is known for first-world comfort... in a third-world country."

—Keith Hockton

The top-performing Asian country is... Malaysia, which sneaks its way up the chart to No. 8 in the Index.

We've long been enthusiastic about this highly developed, English-speaking outpost of Southeast Asia. Its mix of cultures makes for a cosmopolitan society, legendary cuisine, and plenty of sites of historical interest.

Perhaps most compelling is the exceptional affordability of rentals and daily expenses (the country lags Thailand by only two points in the Cost of Living score). In 2023, we removed Malaysia from the Index due to a lack of clarity in its retirement visa offerings. Now, with its Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) visa re-established, and [with better terms as of 2024](#), we're delighted to have it back.

Maybe you've never thought of retiring in Asia. If you haven't, you may be missing the spot that's just right for

**"Portugal's cost of living is among the lowest in Western Europe."**

## THREE REGIONS, THREE CULINARY CAPITALS

**W**e travel to explore. We travel to experience distant lands and cultures. We travel to eat. Perhaps especially to eat. For many of our expats, cuisine was a deciding factor in where they chose to lay roots.

What are the top foodie cities in this year's Index? Well, there were many, many contenders. But among our top three regions, here are the places with the most expat votes...

Each offers decidedly contrasting palettes, while situated in vastly different corners of the world. The common denominator... Their celebration of local flavors and culinary artistry.

### Oaxaca City, Mexico

If you want to feel, smell, and taste history, come to Oaxaca (wah-HAH-kah), nestled in the foothills of Mexico's Sierra Madre range. With its magnificent colonial-era architecture and cobblestone streets, it's one of Mexico's historic crown jewels. It's also considered the country's gastronomic center.

Here, locals and expats alike pride themselves on their nuanced palettes, especially when it comes to chocolate, *mole*, mezcal, and wine. For thousands of years, Oaxaca has been home to the Zapotec and Mixtec indigenous populations, and you can taste their influence in the city's many varieties of complex yet subtle *mole* sauces.

Cheryl Goldberg, an expat from North Carolina, moved to Oaxaca in 2023 with her partner Gary. Both revel in the foodie scene of their new hometown (and find the city's ornate architecture an added bonus).

"We go out for lunch or dinner every day. We never did that in the US because it was too expensive... and the food wasn't that good. My biggest pleasure is sitting down for lunch—the food here is exceptional and costs practically nothing."

To truly immerse yourself in Oaxaca's culinary scene, head to the 2025 [Oaxaca Food & Wine Festival](#). The event runs from February 20-23, and as of this writing, tickets are still available.

### Lyon, France

When you think of French cuisine, you may have visions of Parisian cafés and soufflés,



The smorgasbord of dining options is reason alone to live in Mexico, France, or Malaysia.

but according to Tuula Rampont, *IL*'s France Correspondent, Lyon is the country's true gastronomic capital. "Its swoon-worthy bakeries, cheese shops, chocolate confectioners, pastry artists, and macaron makers elevate good food to a level that gets inside your soul," she says.

Tuula recommends Bouillet's Opaline pastry, a madeleine cake layered with olive oil-infused mousse, puréed kiwi, herbed pesto, and candied kiwi paste. "It turns out that olive oil mousse is a thing," she says, "... and it's incredibly delicious."

Lyon, in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region of France, is certainly "all about the food," but there's a lot more to this captivatingly beautiful town. As Tuula puts it, Lyon is "proud without being snobby, cultured without being pretentious. You'll discover a surprising *bonhomie*... a friendliness that defies all the usual stereotypes about French hospitality."

### Penang, Malaysia

Penang, a small tropical island off the west coast of peninsular Malaysia, is a melting pot of cultures with a thriving expat population. It's widely considered the food capital of the country, offering an unparalleled variety of cuisines.

"Eating out in Malaysia is not only affordable," says *IL* Malaysia Correspondent Keith Hockton, "but a delightful culinary journey. With street food and local hawker cent-

ers offering mouthwatering Malaysian, Chinese, and Indian dishes, dining out becomes a daily treat. For as little as \$2 to \$5, you can savor everything from *nasi lemak* (coconut rice with spicy sambal and fried chicken) to *char kway teow* (stir-fried noodles with prawns and egg), all while soaking in the lively atmosphere.

"If you're craving a fancier meal, mid-range restaurants are still very reasonable—think \$15 to \$25 for a delicious dinner for two with drinks. And with plenty of international cafes and restaurants, expats can enjoy a mix of both local and Western flavors without straining their budget.

"The trick is to try a little of everything... and then settle on one or a number of the dishes, depending on how hungry you are (and make sure you ask if they're spicy... If your tolerance to spice isn't high, then it could end your gastronomic adventure early.)"

Keith recommends a few restaurants to experience Penang's global cuisines: [Kebaya](#), which blends Chinese and Malay fares; Michelin-starred [Il Bacaro](#), with the most authentic Italian in the city; and [Sardaarji](#), an award-winning Indian restaurant where you can tuck into aromatic biryani, butter chicken in a creamy tomato sauce, or the tandoori platter—for about \$20 per couple.

—Holly Andrew



you. In this former British colony, English is almost universally spoken, making it uniquely well-suited for digital nomads and retirees. The population is ethnically diverse, too, with large populations of Chinese and Indian descendants in addition to local Malays. And despite being an officially Islamic country, there are no restrictions on the religious activities of non-Muslims.

While private healthcare is the primary option for expats, it's still much cheaper than in Western countries. For instance, a hip replacement that would cost \$60,000 in the US might cost only \$8,000 in Malaysia. Routine doctor visits and specialist appointments are also affordable, typically ranging from \$10 to \$50, so high-quality healthcare is always within reach.

That's what you'd expect from one of Southeast Asia's strongest economies. But what you might not expect is just how affordable upscale housing is...

In typical expat hubs like Penang or Kuala Lumpur, high-end property is available to rent for prices that wouldn't even secure a shared room in some US cities.

Imagine living in a spacious three-bedroom apartment in a bustling city like

Penang or Kuala Lumpur for just \$600 to \$1,200 a month—a fraction of the cost in cities like New York or Toronto. For those who prefer quieter surroundings, smaller towns offer even better deals, plus lush landscapes and a more laidback lifestyle.

Keith Hockton rents a 2,400-square-foot luxury apartment in Penang for \$950 a month.

Keith loves the water views. His wife, Lisa, loves that it's a short stroll to cafés and restaurants. The couple dines out most nights because it's actually cheaper than cooking (a meal for two is as little as \$10).

They have a maid come every week to clean (\$17). And every week, they stock the kitchen with bags of fresh fruits full of mangoes, bananas, oranges, apples, and pineapples... for \$3.50. They get cable TV with HBO for only \$35 per month.

In sum, they live in luxury, but for a fraction of what they'd pay back home. And Keith's place isn't a one-off, because around here it's normal to find high-end accommodation at incredibly low prices.

With a cost of living that will allow a couple to live handsomely from \$1,700 a month, you can splurge on regular trips around Southeast Asia...

Situated right in the center of the region, Malaysia is the ideal base for trips to Thailand, Bali, Cambodia, or Vietnam. "We flew to Phuket, Thailand, for the weekend," says Kirsten Raccuia, who lived there for eight years. "The flight is only

one hour, and costs \$70. The little bungalow we rented on the beach was only \$45 for two nights. Most of the time, you can find flights to any other Southeast Asian country for under \$200."

Expatriate Beth Steiert finds plenty to do here. "From early morning

hikes through the rainforest to sandy sunset happy hours. You can pamper your body at a spa or your palate at a food stall. High-end or hostel, Malaysia has it all."

While it's far away, it's not hard to find round-trip flights between Kuala Lumpur and Los Angeles, for instance, for between \$600 and \$1,000.

Traveling around the country itself is simple. There's no need for a car in the

**“Traveling  
around Malaysia is  
easy, as destinations  
and prices are  
in English.”**



In the bustling city of Penang, a three-bedroom apartment rents for \$600 to \$1,200 a month. (Above, a view from Penang Hill toward George Town City.)



Keith's 2,400 sq. ft. apartment on Penang Island rents for \$950 a month.

cities, since the public transport network is efficient. And because Malaysia was once a British colony, you'll find destinations, prices, and instructions listed in English.

That British cultural legacy extends into the countryside, too—including genteel hill stations where afternoon tea is still served on manicured lawns and pink gins are quaffed amid Old World opulence, ceiling fans, and elephant's-foot umbrella stands.

Contrast that with Malaysia's high-tech infrastructure and economy... High-speed internet, 24-hour living, and the energy that comes from being a melting pot of dynamic cultures.

Malaysia delivers an indescribable mix of gracious Asian tradition alongside 21st-century modernity that just works. It's visible in the glitter of high-speed rail links reflected off mirrored skyscrapers while informal tai-chi sessions take place on the lawns of colonial-era parks below.

With temperatures averaging 82 F, mountain retreats, thousands of miles of coastline, untracked jungles, and chains of islands peppering the surrounding sea, Malaysia has everything you could ask for, along with First-World healthcare at low prices. "I damaged my knee playing tennis one evening, and I was sitting in front of a world-class surgeon the following morning," says Keith. "I had an MRI result within an hour, which cost just \$73, and I had an operation to repair my meniscus the following day."

Meanwhile the capital, Kuala Lumpur,

is often compared favorably to Singapore, with excellent public transport, innovative urban design, and towering skyscrapers, plus an efficient airport with connections all over the globe. Although there aren't any direct flights to the US, there are easy connections via Middle Eastern and Far Eastern hubs like Doha, Tokyo, and Hong Kong.

In sum, healthcare is among the most modern and affordable in the world; property rental costs a fraction of what it does in the US; and the standard of living can be downright luxurious, on a middle-class budget.

If you've dismissed Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, as too complicated a prospect for your retirement, it's actually one of the easiest options of all.

## We'd Be Remiss Without a Nod to Thailand

Shouldering its way up our Index chart, Thailand lands at No. 11 this year, in large part due to the incredibly low cost of living and excellent healthcare.

Barton Walters moved to Thailand 25 years ago and never looked back... "American expats move here to live twice as good for half as much."

In this month's issue, you'll read about Mike Esposito from San Francisco, who moved to the Pratumnak Hill community on Thailand's Eastern Seaboard...

"This place ticks every box for me," he says. "I rent a cool studio with a sea view for \$600 a month. I can walk to dozens of great restaurants, coffee shops, pubs, and music bars. I can hop on my motorbike and go shopping at a fantastic mall on the beach in Pattaya or cruise down the coast to Bang Sare and eat right-off-the-boat seafood."

Barton says the Thai government's [progress-forward infrastructure projects](#) are (mostly) changing the country for the better, making it easy for expats to access some of its most desirable locales. As Barton notes, it's a place with plenty of opportunity for real estate investors, too. ■

**Editor's note:** Some of our favorite expat communities aren't in the top five countries on our Index... or even the top 10. For a region-by-region deep dive into the world's best spots—for whatever sort of lifestyle you're after—watch for our January 2025 issue.

## GET THE FULL 2025 INDEX

This article is just the start... We've got so much more to tell you about the top 20 best places in the world to retire that we can't fit it all into this issue of your magazine.

Photos, video, category-by-category breakdowns of what makes each of these countries—including Colombia, Italy, Vietnam, and many more—so appealing to our experts living there.

As an *International Living* reader, we're giving you full, subscribers-only access to *IL*'s full 2025 Retirement Index Report—FREE. It's packed with on-the-ground insights and recommendations you can't get anywhere else. [Grab your report here.](#)

**ANNUAL  
GLOBAL  
RETIREMENT  
INDEX  
2025**





"Party destination" Playa del Carmen is all grown up... attracting expats in pursuit of quiet luxury.

# Close to Home, a Luxury Caribbean Hideaway Emerges

Bel Woodhouse

"Wow, Playa's really grown up." This was my thought as I passed an astounding variety of restaurants near my one-block-from-the-beach apartment in **Playa del Carmen**, Mexico.

I clocked two sushi restaurants, four Italian restaurants, grills, upscale steakhouses, a bunch of Mexican/international fusion cuisine spots, and an Argentinean Empanada place I bookmarked to return to later. Plus, something I really hadn't expected... a Middle Eastern restaurant whose falafel proved to be THE BEST of my life. And it was so cheap—145 pesos (\$7.30).

Playa, a town of about 300,000 people along the Caribbean coast, is a short ferry ride from my home in **Cozumel**. I've been visiting Playa for years to enjoy shopping, dining out with friends, interesting day trips to cultural sites, and as a gateway to explore the rest of the Riviera Maya and Yucatan Peninsula.

While it's long been a favorite value vacation destination, renowned for its white sand beaches and spring-break party scene, there's been quite a transformation over the last decade...

Playa still offers fun in the sun, but it's settling into its new role as sophisticated central hub. More and more people are coming here for a healthier, lower cost cosmopolitan lifestyle... full of fine dining, artisan crafts, high-end shopping, and luxury condos, all wrapped up in 340 days of sunshine each year.

In sum, Playa has grown up to be a real city rather than just a party holiday destination. Any style of life you choose—and just about any amenity you want—is on offer in beautiful natural surroundings. Fitness facilities and eco retreats are abundant, making it an up-and-coming wellness travel destination, too.

On my prior visits to Playa, I've stayed in the peaceful Ipana condos in the **Centro** area, or the heart of Playa del Carmen, lazing by the rooftop pools with a glass of wine and watching the sunset to end the day. Or relaxing and discussing where to go for dinner among the vast selection of nearby restaurants. Yet it

**"People are coming here for a healthier, lower-cost cosmopolitan lifestyle."**

always amazed me how quiet Ipana is at night. I've slept wonderfully on each visit.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that in low season (May–November), you can spend a month in one of the Ipana condos for only \$1,419 (includes a long-stay discount). Not bad, considering it's a five-minute walk to the beach with a supermarket downstairs and rooftop pools upstairs.

On this particular visit, I stayed in another area of Centro I haven't been to before, in a complex called **Singular Dream**. The complex is in a quieter part of the neighborhood closer to the beach. With its own rooftop pool overlooking the Caribbean, I began dreaming of caramelized figs, gourmet goat cheese, and wine while watching the sunset.

I meandered to the pedestrian-only, tree-lined Quinta Avenida (5th Avenue), running parallel to the beach. It's full of bars, restaurants, and shops—everything from cheap knick knacks to high-dollar items. But today, it's lost some of the "party hard" vibe. Quinta Avenida still offers a good time, but you'll find more upscale boutiques, fine dining, and artisan products... a sure sign Playa is catering to a more sophisticated clientele.

One great example is Michelin-starred **HA' in Hotel Xcaret**. Featuring a nine-course, contemporary Mexican tasting menu, it's quintessential quiet luxury in the Riviera Maya.

But my favorite fine dining spot is a wine bar called **Off the Vine** on Quinta Avenida. With walls of fantastic Mexican and international wines, it fits perfectly into the relaxed luxurious vibe of the area.

And then there's Caseus Epicerie Fine—an upscale gourmet cheese shop on Avenida 10 (just off Quinta), offering delights so delectable I dare you not to stop. I'm talking proper Spanish Manchego cheese made from sheep's milk... a little taste of heaven... and caramelized figs I popped into my bag to complement my personal favorite, goat cheese. Young, creamy, velvety-smooth goat cheese. And then I was coveting bread and wine to go with it.

So my next stop was **Chedraui**,

an extravagant supermarket housing an excellent wine section and bakery. Exploring the bakery was an upmarket affair. With mouthwatering varieties of fresh breads, warming cabinets with rows of salted and unsalted pretzels, and six kinds of bagels (14 pesos each—\$0.70), my inner bread-aholic rejoiced. I grabbed a baguette... and a nice Spanish red wine to accompany the goat cheese and figs.

### Playa del Carmen “Speaks to the Trees”

The **Centro** neighborhood, where Chedraui, Singular Dream, and the Ipana condos are located, is considered by many to be the prettiest. Walking towards the beach has a green feel. Restaurants blend into the environment of this tree-lined street creating an eco-vibe.

On Calle 38 (38th Street), grand old fig trees stretched across the entire roadway, providing cooling shelter and making the two-block walk to Singular Dream delightful. Music spilled out of restaurants, along with the laughter of patrons. The smell of sautéing garlic wafted out into the street, causing an almost Pavlovian response from all who walked by. Friendly locals said hello, waved, or nodded without being pushy (as they sometimes are along Quinta Avenida).

One particular tree along Calle 38 is part of a local initiative called the Living Museum of Ancient Urban Native Trees.

As a frequent visitor to Playa, it was the first time I’d heard of it and to me, a nature lover, it made the area all the more attractive.

‘Alamo,’ as this tree is called, is not only a local landmark, but also beautifies the Centro neighborhood. Its plaque reads, “I am an Alamo, an old and native barbel tree that likes to walk!”



“I am an Alamo, an old and native barbel tree that likes to walk!” reads this tree’s plaque.



That’s another way Playa del Carmen has matured in its conservation efforts.

In fact you can see the preservation of natural landmarks and fine dining are combined in delightful ways. A great example is Alux Restaurant, where you can have an intimate dining experience in a 1,000-year-old cave in the heart of Playa del Carmen. (The Alux, pronounced “Ah-loosh,” are mischievous Mayan jungle protectors—small gnomes or elves said to throw rocks or play tricks on you if you disrespect nature, the forests, or its plants and animals.)

### Neighborhoods for Every Taste

Beach lovers who enjoy fine dining options and nightlife would do well to consider **Coco Beach** at the northern end of the Centro area. A five-minute walk and you can have the beach and anything else you’d want at your fingertips.

If a quieter life perfect for families is what you’re after, but you still want to be close to everything, then the gated communities of **El Cielo** just north of Centro, or **Playacar** at the southern end of Centro, are worth checking out.

For those chasing a luxurious lifestyle, a 24-minute drive to **Puerto Aventuras** offers private docks, golf courses, sport-fishing, tennis, and few tourists.

That’s the thing about Playa del Carmen—it’s flexible. There are plenty of options, no matter what your dream life looks like.

Just a 12-minute drive from Centro is **Corasol**, a beautiful community with a golf course, swimming pools, beach club, and restaurant. Spider monkeys swing by,

and chachalacas, also known as Mexican pheasants run through the trees calling to each other, enjoying the lush landscaped gardens and abundant trees.

Jungle retreats and yoga studios are popular throughout Playa, where you’ll also find modern fitness facilities with state-of-the-art equipment, personal trainers, beach swimming clubs, and wellness programs... like eco-entrepreneur and spiritual awakening retreats.

With eco-friendly luxury options, relaxation lounges, and holistic massage, It’s the place to be when you’re on a mission to relax and rejuvenate.

Plus, Mexico’s enticing 180-day visa-free visit, makes Playa del Carmen popular with snowbirds and digital nomads. No annoying paperwork or applications, just beautiful white sand beaches and crystal-clear, warm Caribbean waters.

**“It’s the place to be when you’re on a mission to relax and rejuvenate.”**

If you’re interested in living in Mexico, take advantage of the visa-free visit for a scouting trip. There are plenty of English speaking real estate agents, and on average, a two-bed, two-bath rental near the

beach with a pool starts at around \$950 a month. Further back from the beach, prices drop.

Also, the [Playa expat Facebook group](#) is full of people with insider knowledge about places to rent. Oftentimes the longer you rent, the larger the discount available.

It’s easy to live a luxurious life in this next evolution of Playa. Even on a budget, though the temptation to overindulge (especially in gourmet treats) is everywhere.

With its wealth of dining options, boutique shopping, beautiful beach zone condos, and conservation strategies to preserve natural beauty, it’s growing up the right way. ■

**Bel Woodhouse** is *IL*’s Mexico Correspondent. Hailing from Australia, she’s lived in the Mexican Caribbean for seven years.

**Editor’s note:** Alliance members can learn more about Playa del Carmen and get more tips from Bel in this exclusive [Untourist video](#).





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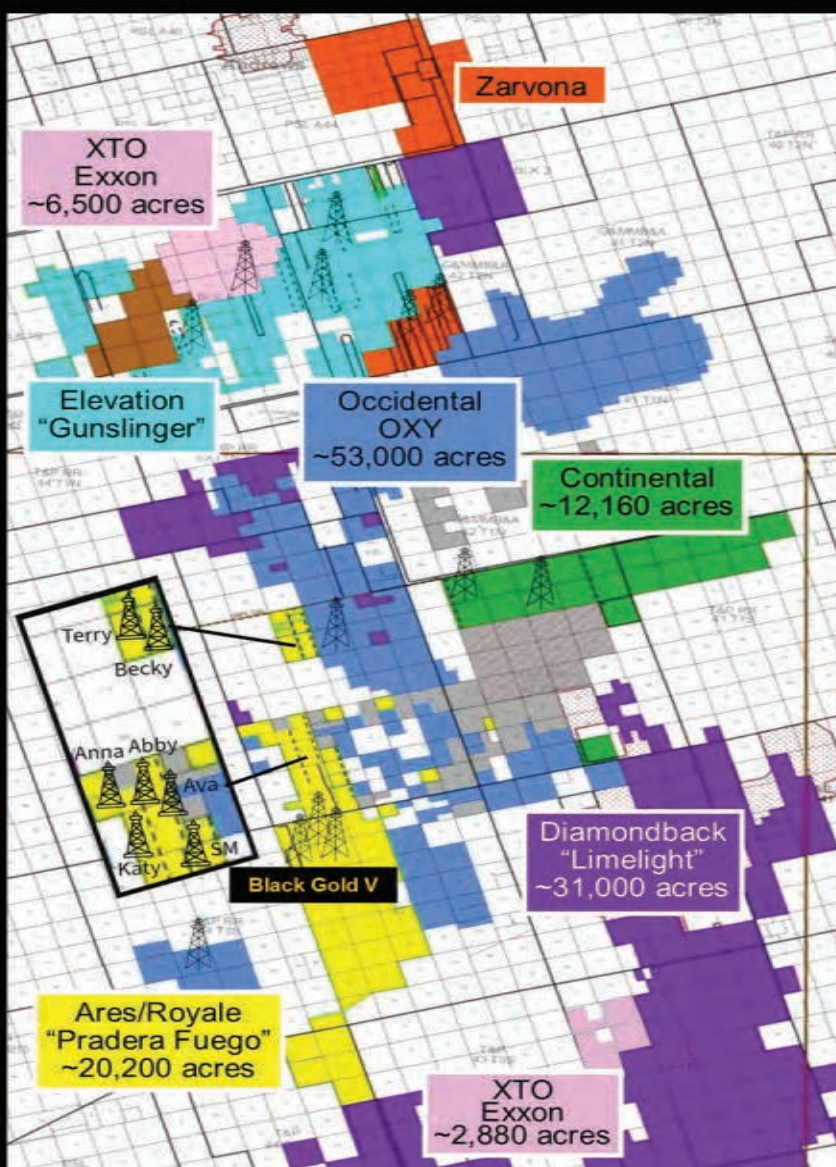
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**I**t's early morning on Medano Beach in Los Cabos...

People are just beginning to gather on this renowned stretch of golden sand. They've come to swim and paddleboard in the warm, turquoise waters... to lie on the soft sand, soak up the incredible views of the Land's End rock formation, and (if they're lucky) watch whales frolic just offshore as the gentle breeze rolls off the Sea of Cortez...

Soon, this beach will be alive with young families, snowbirds, trendy twentysomething vacationers... even digital nomads tapping away on laptops in the cafés and restaurants that front the chic resorts just back from the sand.

A similar pattern is playing out right across Cabo...

As the sun rises over the dramatic desert landscapes, folks will begin flocking to Cabo's famed marina... to its world-class seafront golf courses... to the high-end malls and fine-dining restaurants... to the cactus-fringed hiking trails...

This is Los Cabos in December, at the start of its long peak season. And this year's season is expected to be the busiest ever...

### A Boomtown by the Sea

Located at the southern end of the Baja California peninsula, Cabo is one of the world's most popular and desirable destinations... a place that has long attracted the rich and famous with its glistening coastline and incredible 5-star resorts.

I live and breathe the Cabo real estate market like no other. I own more real estate here (six condos) than anywhere else on my international beat. I also spend some time at one of my homes here each winter (when I'm not on the road scouting). As a result, I've had a front-row seat to Cabo's incredible transformation.

For a decade now, Cabo has been on a tear...

With flights from 30 US cities, 16 locations in Mexico, 11 in Canada, and two from Europe, Cabo welcomed a record 3.86 million air passengers in 2023. And it's on course to break that record once again this year, according to the Los Cabos tourism promotion organization ([Fiturca](#)).

As more and more people come, demand for accommodation here has soared...

The average daily rate for hotel rooms



John Wayne, Bing Crosby, and Lucille Ball helped catapult Cabo from fishing village to luxury retreat.

# The Destination Where I Own the Most Real Estate

Ronan McMahon

has risen from \$417 in 2022 to \$517 this year... a massive jump in a short period. But rising prices haven't deterred folks from traveling to Cabo. So far this year hotel occupancy rates are at 76%, up from 70% in the previous two years. This is great news if you own the right real estate. The income potential of owning here is incredible.

Those high occupancy rates also spotlight another aspect of the Cabo market...

Peak season here is December to April, when average temperatures range between 77 and 80 F. But you don't get a 76% occupancy rate if people aren't coming at other times of year too.

Nowadays, there is no true off-season in Cabo. This destination has incredible, year-round appeal. In summer and winter, more and more vacationers come to experience the laidback seaside vibe... the natural beauty of the desert and mountains meeting the sea in dramatic fashion... gourmet dining and high-end shopping...

Not to mention the growing ranks of people moving here full time...

Between 2010 and 2020, the population of Cabo San Lucas and San José del Cabo (the two cities that form Los Cabos) grew by 47%, rising from 238,487 to 351,111.

And according to official projections, the two cities are set to reach 700,000 to 800,000 by 2040.

Once seen primarily as a vacation destination, Cabo is now a true city... a place for retirement and year-round living. And its rapid population growth is expected to continue. This makes it one of the best places in the world for real estate investment. (Last month, I named it the No. 3 destination in the world to own real estate for 2025. [See the top 10 here.](#))

But the massive influxes of people, and the resulting explosion in prices, also mean that the real estate opportunity here is now specific to one kind of deal...

### Where It All Began

Before looking at what comes next for Cabo, it's important to understand how it got to this point.

Cabo's journey from remote fishing village to luxury retreat of the rich and famous all began with Lucille Bremer, a Hollywood actress and friend of Bing Crosby and Lucille Ball.

Bremer starred in the 1944 hit *Meet Me in St. Louis*, but by 1948, she had left Tinseltown for Mexico. She'd fallen in love with Mexican entrepreneur Abelardo Luis Rodriguez, the son of a Mexican president,



who built the first-ever resort in Cabo and an airstrip (the only way to reach his resort, Rancho Las Cruces, was by private plane or boat).

Lucille spread the word among her Hollywood friends and soon the likes of John Wayne and Bing Crosby were flocking here to relax in the sun and fish for sea bass, marlin, and sailfish in what was essentially a private enclave.

The area's first marina opened in the 1970s. This attracted more sports fishermen and allowed ferries to come in, bringing more tourists. Then in 1977, the Los Cabos International Airport opened and with it came flights from the US and Canada. This made getting to Cabo easier, though this destination remained high-end. It was still mostly rich folks who made their way here.

Through the 1980s and into the mid-2000s, Cabo rose to new-found prominence and a select group of big hotel and resort owners began making money hand over fist. They bought huge beachfront ranches, which even back in the '80s would have come with big price tags. The only people in the market for them were these big local resort owners.

A small club of insiders competed for—and then divided up—the spoils. Land prices were too high and the market too much of a closed shop for any outsiders to come in and start developing.

The residential real estate market was similar. When Hollywood and the ultra-wealthy are beating a path to your door looking for a second home (or a third, fourth, or fifth one), you build homes for that market.

By the early to mid 2000s, prices had reached a fever pitch in Cabo. Then the global economic crisis hit. In Cabo, construction stopped. Buyers and investors were no longer willing to pour millions into vacation homes... or spend hundreds of thousands per year on a timeshare.

But Los Cabos, with such fundamental appeal, was always going to bounce back. And it did, with a twist...

Cabo had always been a hideaway for the wealthy and celebrities. But in the aftermath of the financial crisis, it began attracting what I call the "ordinary rich."

"Ordinary rich" is a term I use for small business owners, entrepreneurs, computer

scientists, bankers, lawyers, doctors... people who earn well and can move around to some degree. Most aren't in the market for multi-million-dollar mansions or 5-star resorts. But they want luxury and exceptional resort-style amenities... and they can pay for them.

Because of the long-term focus on luxury, there was a shortage of this kind of real estate in Cabo. That created an opportunity... one that I and members of my *Real Estate Trend Alert* group were ahead of. Over the last decade, I've found incredible deals by looking for exactly the kind of real estate that the ordinary rich want... affordable luxury.

**"Cabo is now attracting the 'ordinary rich.'"**

I mentioned earlier that Cabo is the place where I own the most real estate. My first purchase here was in 2015 in the Copala community at the 5-star Quivira Resort. The off-market,

RETA-only price to own two-bed, ocean-view condos here was from \$336,156. An identical condo to mine two floors above listed for \$725,000 in late 2022. That's \$388,844 more.

An off-market deal is where I work with developers to bring exclusive pricing on real estate to RETA members. Selling best-in-class properties takes time, money, and effort for a developer, but by working with my RETA group, the developer can sell a chunk of his inventory to a select, highly motivated group of people... quickly. And in return, RETA members get off-market pricing that other folks never see.

The Copala opportunity was the start of a run of killer off-market RETA member-only deals in Cabo. A few others...

- **Boost of \$212,400**—In May 2022, we had a deal in a community called Monte Rocella, where I bought two condos alongside RETA members. A condo that RETA members could buy for \$272,600 later listed for \$485,000.
- **\$250,000 Uplift**—In August 2021, RETA members could get a penthouse in a community called Cabo Costa for \$249,000. I got one. Today a penthouse in Cabo Costa lists for \$499,000.

These were incredible deals. But as you can see, real estate prices have been soaring higher here. Which poses the question: Where is the opportunity now in Cabo?

## What's Next for Cabo?

RETA members were ahead of Cabo's astonishing transformation. But Cabo is now one of the hottest markets on my beat. The opportunity here is no longer "ground floor."

That said, Cabo's growth has a long way to run. There are still opportunities. But now they are deal-specific. By that I mean, prices here are pushing higher on incredible demand. So to own in Cabo and see excellent capital appreciation with high rental yields, you need to find just the right deal at just the right entry price.

That means an off-market deal... like those I bring to my *Real Estate Trend Alert* group.

I am always on the hunt for new off-market, RETA-only deals in Cabo, though they are challenging to find. I only work with the best developers on best-in-class real estate. And my team conducts due diligence checks on every potential deal. Few pass muster.

Now, though, I believe I've finally found a new opportunity in Cabo. Details are still being finalized, but RETA members will be the first to hear about this deal in the coming weeks if it comes together. (As I've said, these deals are exclusively for RETA members. If you're interested in hearing about this upcoming Cabo deal, and future deals, learn how you can [become a RETA member here](#).)

In addition to constantly monitoring the Cabo market, I'm also keeping an eye on the "next places" in Baja...

As Cabo's population continues to grow, opportunity will spread to up-and-coming destinations on this peninsula like the towns of **La Ventana** and **Loreto** and the city of **La Paz**.

These places are firmly on my radar. And they should be on yours too if you share my affinity for this region's stunning desert-meets-ocean landscapes, and the incredible weather and lifestyle that comes with them. ■



**Ronan McMahon** is *IL's* international real estate expert and the founder of *Real Estate Trend Alert*. He's been traveling the globe for more than 25 years, living and investing in some of the world's dreamiest—and surprisingly affordable—locations. Sign up for his free [Overseas Dream Home letter right here](#).



Panama City's hard-won transformation from ugly duckling to world-class capital was worth the wait.

## Panama's Capital Hits the Big Time: Where to Dine, Play, and Stay

Jess Ramesch

Dusk falls over Panama City. Now the palm-lined promenade on the bay, a riot of tropical blues and greens by day, fades out of view. The city lights take the stage. Towers of every shape and size form a twinkling backdrop. Brighter and brighter they shine against the darkening sky.

From the 48th floor, I scan the horizon to pick out the sail-shaped JW Marriot, the F&F Tower's iconic screw, the Soho City Center's devilish little horns...

In night mode, Panama City is more than merely pretty. It's sparkling. Seductive. It's the light fantastic, asking you to take a twirl.

Hailed by the *New York Times* a decade ago as "Panama City Rising," the capital is now "risen," a luminous star that's taken its rightful place in the firmament.

Before, there were dreams... Like high-tech "smart" towers and smarter hospitals. Air-conditioned buses to replace the rattletrap *diablo rojos* ("red devils") that

machine-gunned down city roads belching black exhaust. How about a *subway*? And parks... Oh, how we envied the parks of Buenos Aires and Mexico City. It seemed we'd never get there.

But then... we did. Look out to the horizon and you'll see. There's no pie left in this Panamanian sky.



And the city offerings—the art galleries, the gleaming malls, the golf courses... the corvina, ceviche, and craft-brew cervezas—oh that's where the fun begins... An elevator rockets me down to the building's swanky lobby (décor style: maximalist overdrive, courtesy of Phillippe Starck), where I wait for my Uber. A stream of cars flows by along busy Balboa Avenue, their tail lights painting streaks of yellow and orange against the tall windows. It's 7 p.m. on a Thursday, and some of the best restaurants and nightspots in Latin America sit right outside my door.

As I step out into the night, red lipstick and high heels on, my heart is light. I'm back in the city—*my* city—and ready for some of that glitz, some of that glamour.

### Everything at Your Fingertips

For 17 years I lived here. Then in 2022, I decamped the beach community of **Coronado**. As it's just 65 miles away, I come back all the time. Sometimes just



## “PTY”: THE ULTIMATE EXPLORER’S HUB

City slickers like to refer to the capital as PTY, after Tocumen International Airport’s call letters. Thanks to that self-same airport, the city is also known as the Hub of the Americas. The title is well-earned. Panama’s flagship carrier, Copa Airlines, has grown quickly by aggressively adding new flights, and is now known as the best airline in the region... and Tocumen is the region’s best and busiest airport. From here I

can fly nonstop to Las Vegas, New York, Montréal, Amsterdam, Istanbul... it’s a long, impressive list. (Last I checked, there were 87 destinations.)

But PTY is also the perfect hub if you’re interested in exploring Panama. From here you can take a \$20 ferry to Taboga, the “island of flowers,” the nearest of the Pearl Islands. In 30 minutes you’d swear by the white sands and baby blues of the water that you’d somehow been magicked to the

Bahamas. Of course, we have our own Caribbean isles... the Bocas del Toro archipelago is a 55-minute flight from Panama City. The Guna Yala archipelago is even closer.

In 20 minutes to two hours you can drive to Veracruz beach for mussels and clams, or Buenaventura Golf & Beach Resort for a fancy spa weekend, or the cool-weather crater town of [El Valle](#) for hiking and more.

for the day or a weekend with my closest friends, sometimes longer.

This is an extended stay. Over the next two weeks, I’ll hit all my favorite spots and make new discoveries, too. Panama is the city that always surprises.

I’m already off to a jolly good start. My Airbnb [apartment](#) in the fabulous Yoo Panama & Arts Tower complex is everything I wanted and more. City living at its absolute best. On site I’ve got access to several restaurants, including Azahar—a stunner that looks like it belongs in Soho. (Soho, London, SoHo Manhattan... take your pick.)

Across the street is the **Cinta Costera**, one of the world’s great city promenades and a place where I’ve spent countless happy hours. It’s filled with flowers and trees, bike and pedestrian paths, tennis and basketball courts, and more—all of it spanning our warm, sunny, hurricane-free

stretch of the Pacific ocean.

I can also walk (yes, even in heels) to a little gem of a market called Foodie for just about anything from rosé and paté to batteries and paper towels. Or to **Urraca Park**, where there are often free fairs and concerts (and it’s decked out to the nines at Christmastime).

Or to **Meze**, for some of the best Greek food in the world... **Café Unido**, for some of the best coffee in the world... or **Taberna La Malagueña**, my gold-star go-to for no-frills tapas and no-frills prices. (Order the spicy shrimp that comes to your table in a skillet of bubbling hot garlic oil... and stay for the weekly flamenco show, it’s the real deal.)

In approximately 15 minutes I can also walk—in sneakers—to my chiropractor in the Royal Center/Paitilla Hospital mini medical village; an upscale Riba Smith supermarket; the Deli K kosher

supermarket; King’s Food Indian market; Multicentro, a mall with a Hard Rock Café and casino; Soban Korean (glass noodles! Korean pancakes!); and Maru Korean Dessert Café (get the cute goldfish-shaped Bungeo Croffle with the gooey center and die happy).

In fact, there are so many amenities and services within a short walk or \$4 Uber ride from here, I feel ridiculous owning a car. If I move back to the city—*tempting*—I’ll sell it. Then again, apartments in town do tend to come with parking spots... and there are beaches, mountains, and national parks just one to two hours away.

*Everything at your fingertips...*

For years, a whispered promise carried on the ocean breeze... past the bright orange detour signs and traffic cones... past squadrons of massive mustard yellow machines that earned us the punny moniker “City of Cranes.” Change was coming. Behind the chicken wire and the barricades, it was coalescing.

Today you can take one look around you and see. The promise of Panama City has been fulfilled.

Tonight, my friend has suggested we try Popino, a new restaurant at another Yoo tower called Wanders. The interior is, in a word, sexy. Velvet, brass, lacquered chocolate ceiling... It looks like something straight out of a glossy coffee table book on interior design. The music is clubby but not too loud. And the menu... definitely on the pricier side.

At \$12, our cocktails aren’t unreasonable—I get the New York, a not-too-fussy twist on a Manhattan that I’d happily order again (Johnny Walker, amaro, aged rum, toasted coconut, a hint of ver-



Popino restaurant is the epitome of Panama City style... elegant, seductive, spicy.

## GREAT STUFF I DID IN PANAMA CITY... AND WHAT IT COST ME

\$0	Phenomenal walks on the Cinta Costera into Casco Viejo
\$0	Rollerblading on the Amador Causeway
\$0	Hiking up Ancon Hill with friends
\$0	Multiple visits to the gym and pool in my building
\$0	Live jazz/salsa at Villa Ana, the best speakeasy I've ever been to (sorry NYC)
\$0	Live classic rock at Tres Gatos Brewery
\$3.25	Coffee at Café Unido
\$5.35	Coffee and tour of the art-filled Sofitel Hotel in Casco Viejo
\$8	Coffee and snacks at Misawa Japanese Bakery
\$10	Coffee and pastries at Maru Korean Dessert Café
\$20	Cognac at Villa Ana
\$20	Flight of microbrews and snacks at Tres Gatos Brewery
\$30	Guided rainforest walk for three at Parque Metropolitano
\$85	Lavish dinner at Popino
\$230	Shopping at Express and Steve Madden (Multiplaza mall)
\$52	Cocktails and dinner at hip Fonda Lo Que Hay in Casco Viejo
\$281	Maintenance for my Hyundai Accent at the dealership
\$27	Lunch and Soju at Soban Korean restaurant
\$34	Sparkling water and two Manhattans at the ritzy bar of Hotel La Compañía in Casco Viejo
\$21	Two coffees, sparkling water, and spanakopita for lunch at Meze
\$17	Pastry and mimosa at American Society luncheon at Petit Paris

I also took about ten Uber rides ranging in cost from \$3 to \$6. Other free events in the city included two modern art exhibits, a full moon meditation, a National Symphony concert, and an alternative world film festival at the University of Panama.

Paid events included Panama's very own Comic Con (tickets from \$15), Live salsa at Voodoo Lounge (\$20), and a Sandeman Port tasting event (\$20, which you could then use toward a purchase of the port.) These are activities I was interested in, but there were myriad others... if you're into other things... golf, cigars, what have you... you're likely to find it here!

\*Retiree residents of Panama get 50% off event tickets.



mouth). But the smoked ceviche starter is \$18, and the whole fish of the day—a showstopper grilled up and served with a tomato curry sauce and fried plantains—is \$42. Worth every penny, as it turns out. But you don't have to spend this much.

That's what I love about Panama City. If you want to splurge, you splurge. Spoil yourself on your birthday... impress your

visiting friends... take advantage of the stellar offerings.

But you can also have a great meal for \$12 to \$20. A filling empanada—the original portable meal—at homegrown Athanasiou is still \$2.50, and so is a cup of coffee. Vegetarian and vegan dives like my beloved Chinese buffet, La Casa Vegetariana, dish up hearty, healthy

lunches for as little as \$6.

Bottom line, in Panama City you can enjoy the endless entertainments of a “Sex and the City” episode without the New York City prices.

If you're someone who enjoys dining out and nice wines... massages or tennis lessons... little luxuries and an active, social life... you can do it on \$2,900 a month. That's including rent of \$1,500 a month, utilities with moderate air conditioning use, monthly plans for your cell phone and internet, transportation (Ubers, the metro, and your own two feet), and a generous allowance for wine, groceries, outings, and weekend trips.

There are people who spend far less—if you're not a big drinker, you could be one of them—and there are people who spend far more. You could rent a one-bedroom furnished apartment like mine at the Yoo for \$1,900 a month, but next door, by Le Meridien Hotel, a furnished two-bedroom listed at the same time for just \$1,200 a month. Both buildings are starting to show their age; I wouldn't buy... but as a renter, you couldn't ask for a better location. Take your time and look at more than a few options before you commit.

### Living Like a 21st-Century Queen

Madeleine Cranfill, perhaps the most fabulous, energetic 77-year-old I've ever met, moved here from California so she could live lavishly in an apartment overlooking the sea.

“I wanted to live like a queen,” she announces. “So I told everyone I was moving to happy land. Now they all know that happy land means Panama. Here I can have a maid come in for \$35 a day. If I have her come five days of the week for eight hours a day, I spend \$150. In the US, I could have a maid come in for one day—for three to four hours, tops—for that same amount.”

Madeleine has calculated that if she ever needs round-the-clock care, she can afford to have an in-home nurse. And like many Panamanians, she has attractive service quarters (bedroom and bathroom) in her apartment that she's outfitted for live-in help. “I would not want to be in the US on assisted care when I can be down here paying \$4,000 a month for 24-hour care at home. And Panamanians are very respectful of seniors. That's another thing I like about the country.”



## THE NICEST NEIGHBORHOODS IN PANAMA CITY

In the east, on the water: Close to Tocumen International Airport is opulent, exclusive **Santa Maria**, with its own hotel, golf course (a Jack Nicklaus design), tennis courts, gyms, pools... a country club with dining and bars... everything you'd expect from a top luxury property. Truly an enclave; once you're through the gates, you may well forget you're in Panama.

Closer to the city center (and practically a city unto itself), you have **Costa del Este**. This upscale "suburban" sector attracts families and professionals. There are myriad buildings and gated housing developments in Costa del Este, as well as a waterfront promenade—Panama City is all about walks in the sunshine and fresh ocean air—and banks, restaurants, shopping, pharmacies, and a Johns Hopkins International affiliate, Pacifica Salud (one of two branches in Panama City).

Traffic into the city—along back roads or the Corredor Sur, the toll road that connects these two sectors to the city proper—can be nightmarish at times. But if you're retired or self-employed, it's easy to avoid rush hour. My take: For upscale, Florida-like living, these sectors are worth

your consideration. If, however, you want easy access to city nightlife, choose something more central.

City center: The convenience of living in the walkable city center cannot be overstated, but it can be noisy, so talk to neighbors and spend time on your intended street. See if you can rent short-term to test-drive living there.

On the water you have **Punta Paitilla**, **Punta Pacifica**, and the *Área Bancaria* or Banking District with primo buildings on or just off of **Balboa Avenue** in **Bella Vista**. Paitilla is home to many older buildings where you can often get more space for your money. Punta Pacifica, the area Madeleine chose, is popular, but as it's a bottleneck, I wouldn't want to live here.

My choice was the *Área Bancaria* for easy access to the Cinta Costera. (If I lived in this area year-round, I would leave town during the *Carnaval* season, as this part of town is party central.)

Just off the water (still an easy walk to the Cinta) you have **Marbella**, **El Cangrejo**, and **Obarrio**. These are convenient and walkable, but watch out for holes and other hazards (good advice anywhere in the city). I particularly like the nice new sidewalks in **El Cangrejo**, which is right on the metro line.

On the eastern edge of the city center you have both park-adjacent and ocean-view buildings in greater San Francisco. It has a reputation for being noisy but the restaurants, massive Omar park, and other conveniences close to Multiplaza Mall have attracted plenty of young expats.

West and northwest of the city center you have the historic district of **Casco Viejo** and the green "garden district" of **Ancón**. Casco is very romantic, with its monuments, plazas, and colonial architecture, but also an expensive and at times noisy tourism and nightlife district. But it's walkable and feels like a small town—you'll get to know your neighbors well here. I previously lived in Ancón's **Clayton** sector and enjoyed having a house and a yard with mango trees and little creatures like sloths and agoutis coming through. Owning a house instead of a condo is expensive in any major city, but for green living with easy access to all the city's theaters, hospitals, supermarkets, and more, you may feel it's worth it.

There are many other sectors, but these are currently my top picks for beauty, value, and convenience. [See a map of the city's neighborhoods here.](#)

Not just respectful, but friendly, too. "Never in the US could I have as many young friends in my life as I do here," she confides, "and some of them, they're in their 30s. We go out to dinner—last time I was out till 2 a.m.—and they say 'we love you, you're so much fun!'"

"I'm not a big drinker but I love going out and socializing. Every night there's a game night or an art exhibit... there's the British Ball, the American Society... so many events and organizations, and so many are free. Last night I went to a book signing and there was music and wine, all for free. I didn't have to, but I bought a copy of the book for \$15 to support the author. Then we went for a drink—I had a martini and when the bill came it was for \$7. No way could I have a martini in the US for that price."

### Is Panama City Right for You?

If you need to be close to world-class hospitals, Panama City may be perfect for

you. The city's five top hospitals include a JCI-accredited facility (the prestigious San Fernando hospital) and Hospital Nacional, a facility that accepts [Tricare](#).

If you hate humidity and are also averse to air conditioning, Panama City may not be your place. We have lovely ocean breezes, but the humidity's always there. The city gets light rainfall from April to June or July, and heavy rains from August through November. Still, there are over 300 sunny mornings a year—it's very rare for us to get more than three gray days at a time. Likewise, extreme temperatures are also rare. We're generally between 78 and 88 F all year long.

If you're not going to splurge from time to time—really enjoy everything the city has to offer—then you may want to

consider other parts of Panama. There are so many towns where you can live well for as little as \$2,200 a month, including [Bocas del Toro](#) and the temperate mountain regions of [Chiriquí](#).

If you love the great outdoors, you can certainly get your fill in city parks, as well as trips to the easy-access destinations I've listed above. But you should only choose Panama City if you love (and I mean really love) city life, too.

Finally, ask yourself: Can you live with the tradeoffs?

Is there traffic? Yes.

Litter? Also yes.

Are there bad areas? It's a city. So, yes. But the bad parts are easily avoided while the nice parts—of which there are many—are patently safe. Count the BMWs.

**"There's a real sense anyone can study, work hard, and improve their lot here."**

## SO HOW DO YOU FIGURE OUT WHERE ALL THE FUN IS?

There's no one website or bulletin board. No one waiting with a calendar of events when you deplane. No cruise director on the Lido deck. In Panama City it took me a little time and effort to connect with the right people... get on the right mailing lists. Once you do, you'll realize that there's so much going on, it's impossible to keep track of it all.

First, get comfortable with basic [Spanish](#) (or ChatGPT). If you're into cultural events, [Boletín Infoarte](#) is a labor of love run by the executive director of the Museum of Democratic Culture. If you're interested in expat gatherings, a great place to start is the [American Society of Panama](#) (all

nationalities welcome). Go to one of their public events and network with the well-entrenched expats who know everyone and everything. These are the people that can help you find charities to support, get you onto helpful neighborhood Whatsapp groups, and more.

Looking for some drinking buddies? Or some non-drinking buddies? Try joining [Internations.org](#) for a while to meet multiple interest groups, and a great mix of Panamanians and expats.

The more you go out and talk to people—tell them what you're interested in, and listen to what they have to say—the more you'll connect (and the more comfortable you'll get).

of the sewer systems, a trash wheel called [Wanda](#), and, per the US State Department, “exceptional international connectivity, with seven undersea fiber optic cables.” One by one, I've watched problems give way to solutions.

I'm not being hyperbolic when I say “Panama City delivers on pretty much every level,” or “It's got a New York thing going.”

In the same breath, I'll admit that Panama City's secrets are somewhat challenging to plumb.

Of course they are.

If you've ever made the move to a place like New York, London, Paris, or Rome, then you're intimately acquainted with the sense of pride and joy—*smug* joy, I'll admit that, too—that comes from learning your way around one of the greatest cities on earth.

### This Superstar Flies Under the Radar

Nowhere else on the planet will you find Panama City's winning combo...

A beautiful, cosmopolitan capital (the only one in Central America) replete with international communities from across the globe and a legion of English speakers... that's *also* on the water, *and* warm and sunny all year, but *without* extreme temperatures. An enviable position on the tropical Pacific, on Eastern Standard Time year-round, outside the hurricane zone, and yet just a three-hour flight from Miami. In a safe, prosperous country, where healthcare is widely accessible, and locals actually like and welcome foreigners.

Let's not forget the superstar economy, a famously stable International Banking Center, and the fact that Panama's been using the US dollar for over a hundred years.

Cherry on top: Retiree residents get tremendous discounts that make life in Panama City eminently affordable. Take 20 to 25% off your medications, restaurant meals, and your power bill—and that's just for starters. From great, to greater, to greatest... Panama City has hit the big time. So come on down, and trip the light fantastic. ■

**Jess Ramesch**, an *IL* Senior Editor, has lived on the Indian subcontinent and floated all around the Caribbean (and some snazzy parts of Europe, too). Today she resides in Panama.

Is it loud and chaotic like other Latin American cities...? Yes. Unless you've encountered similar scenarios elsewhere (perhaps in Rome or Mumbai), you may be turned off by the way people drive and the utter abandon with which they honk their horns. (I like to joke that Panamanians are some of the nicest people you'll ever meet—till they get behind the wheel of a car.)

I found it frustrating at first... then one day I woke up and found that I'd fallen madly in love with the... well, madness.

One of the things that won me over was the constant buzz of excitement. There's poverty here, but there's also a very real sense that anyone can study, work hard, and improve their lot. My maid's kids went to college. She was the last person in that family that was ever going to clean houses for a living.

I took Japanese classes at the Technological University of Panama and met all these amazing young Panamanians who were going places. They were learning Japanese or Mandarin or how to code and getting scholarships to study abroad. These are the kinds of people that are making Panama feel safe, welcoming, and exciting.

Panama City has been advancing at light speed for some time now. Look at everything that's been accomplished here recently. Panama has the highest salaries in Latin America. It's the wealthiest country in the entire region (based on purchasing power), and it has the best environmental performance in the region, too.

It's home to Central America's only subway line, which now has a rail-link to the airport, which now has a brand-new terminal, which has basically doubled Tocumen's capacity.

The Pan-American Highway—already a marvel—has just received some major

upgrades, including a flyover that allows me to bypass the fast-growing and always gridlocked La Chorrera on my way to the Coronado beach region where I own an apartment. (I'm thrilled about this one!)

Panama City's skyline and promenades compete on the world stage with the likes of Singapore and Hong Kong. Even *Architectural Digest* has finally gotten the message—this year PTY was included in its list of “The 17 Most Beautiful Skylines in the World.”

Beneath the surface, there's so much more. A massive bay cleanup and revamp

“One by one,  
I've watched  
problems in  
Panama give way  
to solutions.”





Christmas in Aix-en-Provence drops you into a cinnamon-infused wonderland.

## Fill Up Your Elf's Sack in the "Paris of the South"

Tuula Rampont

One chilly December night, my husband and I stood among hundreds of visitors gazing up at Notre-Dame Cathedral in **Strasbourg**. Its impressive spire, the world's tallest structure from 1647 to 1874, rose some 466 feet above us, illuminated by a soft yellow glow radiating down to the spectators below.

To our right, twinkling wooden chalets carried a panoply of gourmet Christmas treats. Plump salted pretzels overflowed from long wooden pegs, while chewy slabs of gingerbread loaves were stacked neatly next to troughs of chocolate candies.

The scent of spicy sausages, steaming sauerkraut, and *vin chaud* (hot wine) filled the crisp air, the cinnamon-sweet combination creating an odd, although somehow comforting mix.

It was a winter wonderland worthy of a Brothers Grimm fairytale. In northeastern France, the [Strasbourg Christmas market](#)—which takes up almost the entirety of the historic center—is hands-down the most popular holiday destination in France. Wildly fun, with a little Kris Kringle kitsch, and busy as heck, it's a top bucket-list Christmas destination.

While this northernmost market will lift your spirit to all levels of jolly, there is perhaps another *quieter* area of France that deserves a closer look. One that puts its heart and soul into local Christmas traditions...

Closely associated with lavender fields and pale pink rosés, the region of **Provence** is a surprisingly exciting holiday destination. Skip the glitzy shoreline and head to some of her blond-stone villages and elegant, tucked-away towns. The Christmas markets are less crowded, awash in local myth and folklore, and full to the hilt with gourmet foods and local wines.

With the December sun shining, start your holiday festivities with the welcoming locals of southern France—who do indeed keep a glass or two of rosé on hand in the winter months.

### Wheat Sprigs, Orange Flower Sweet Breads, and Christmas Eve

The 13 Desserts of Christmas (*13 desserts de Noël*), is one of the most hallowed holiday traditions in Provence. Found in Christmas markets around the south, the desserts may vary from town to town and village

to village—with some tried-and-true favorites on every table.

Why 13, and not 12 or 14? The number is in reference to the Last Supper—12 desserts for the Apostles and one for Jesus. France is largely a Catholic country, and you're bound to experience varying levels of religious ceremonies during any holiday visit.

After the Christmas Eve meal, families lay out the 13 desserts on three layered, white tablecloths symbolizing the Holy Trinity.

On the plates, you'll find dried dates, oranges, green melon, white grapes, white and black nougat (which, according to legend, represents good and evil), candied fruits, raisins, almonds, dried figs, walnuts or hazelnuts, and *la pompe à l'huile*—a local dessert bread made from flour, olive oil, sugar, and orange-blossom syrup. Originally made in **Marseille**, traditional and hybrid versions of the sweetbread are found in bakeries around the city. Near Notre-Dame de la Garde Cathedral, **Pompe Boulangerie** makes cinnamon, chocolate, and praline *pompes à l'huile* year-round.

The folks in **Aix-en-Provence** will also add the *calisson* cookie—an almond-shaped confection made from candied melon and crushed almonds, with a sugar glaze. An emblem of the city.

Perhaps the most eye-catching element of the traditional Christmas Eve spread is the three small bowls of sprouted wheat.

Each December 4th, on the day of Sainte-Barbe, Provençal families plant wheat seeds in three small bowls filled with cotton balls soaked in water. Known as *la sainte du feu*, the saint of fire, Barbe is considered the patron saint of firemen and is a symbol of hope and prosperity. The local saying goes, "*Blé bien germé, c'est la prospérité pour tout l'année.*" Well-sprouted wheat means prosperity all year long.

The tiny green sprouts of wheat stay on the table for three days following Christmas Eve, when they subsequently find homes at the base of the Christmas tree or in front of a Nativity scene—their survival is closely watched through the New Year's celebrations.

Along with a host of other holiday events, the city of Aix-en-Provence hosts a [13 Desserts of Provence](#) Christmas market from December 14-24. The standard desserts will be present, along with artisanal products and the ever-present *calisson*.

## Santons Bring Provençal Traditions Home

Without question, the biggest—and littlest—star of any Provençal Christmas market is the *santon*. These small Nativity scene figures—from baby Jesus to sheep herders and cotton-trousered olive pickers—are the pride of the region. Hand-crafted by award-winning *santonniers*, some of whom have attended the finest art schools in France, the *santons* represent an emotional connection to the land.

Marie Rivals, a marketing manager at the Aix-en-Provence Tourist Office, was born in Provence, and grew up in Aix-en-Provence and the countryside village of **Rians**.

“Every year,” she says, “we take a cardboard box out of the attic to find our *santons*. It’s a family tradition that speaks to the heart of our roots. These small terracotta figurines, fruits of the ancestral know-how of our craftsmen, remind us of the importance of sharing and transmission from generation to generation.”

The annual construction of the Nativity scene, or *crèche*, is one of the highlights of Christmas. In Marie’s family, she says, “We put on our favorite Christmas song, a soft, melancholic melody that connects us to our grandparents... always present in our hearts.”

Families go to a local forest to gather green and white moss, small branches, stones, and pine cones of all shapes and sizes. These decorations help to bring the Provençal Nativity scene to life.

Typical village scenes are played out among the layers of moss and stone. On one corner, a delicately crafted fishmonger waves fistfuls of mackerel in front of

a small fish stand, or *poissonnerie*, while across a pebbled road, a line of washer-women dip chalky sheets into a painted-on river. The local mayor looks on approvingly.

A miniature French bakery, cheese shop, and wine merchant complete the tableau.

Lavender is also a key element in any Provençal Nativity scene. Mini purple fields are placed above the village on cardboard hills. Ladies of the period carry bushels of lavender above their heads, gliding serenely among small rows of olive trees to the village below.

While family *crèches* are more demure affairs, the official Nativity scene of any city or village can reach up to 10-feet in length, or more. The *Grande Crèche Aixoise*, on display at the Aix-en-Provence Tourist Office from November 15th to January 5th, is over 30-feet-long and includes landmarks like the pink salt flats of the **Camar-gue** and wind-struck palm trees from the **Côte d’Azur**.

Aix-en-Provence hosts its own [Foire aux Santons](#) (Santons Fair) from November 15th to December 31st. Holiday-goers can admire and purchase a colorful cast of *santons* and regional Nativity decorations. Admission is free.

*Santon* artisans also open their workshops for visits. [Santons Foque](#) and [Santons Richard](#) are both located in Aix-en-Provence and make for great detours after a morning spent at the local Christmas market.

### Where to Start Your Christmas Tour

Aix-en-Provence, and the countryside around the town, is a great start to any Provençal Christmas tour. Known as the “Paris of the South,” beguiling Aix is the birthplace of the painter Cézanne and arguably one of the prettiest places in all of France.

Against a backdrop of stately blond-stone mansions (*hôtels particuliers*) and elegant, plane-tree-lined boulevards, the town rolls out the *tapis rouge* at Christmas-time.

Along with the 13 Desserts, the *Santon* fair, and a truffle market, Aix hosts an international “twin cities” Christmas market. This year, Aix’s twin cities across nine countries will be represented by different artisans, creators, and food vendors.

For the best way to enjoy the festivities, Marie Rivals has some advice:

“Drop your suitcase off at the [Aquabella](#), [Negre Coste](#), or [Escaletto](#) hotel in the city center,” she says, “Go to the reception of the Aix-en-Provence [Tourist Office](#) and choose a themed tour: Christmas markets, Provençal Nativity scenes—there’s something for everyone—and let yourself be carried away by the magic of the city.”

She suggests finishing at Place François Villon at the *Marché Gourmand des Vignerons*—a gourmet market hosted by local wine makers.

“You can fill up your *hotte de lutin* (elf sack) at the Christmas market,” says Marie, “and after, have an aperitif to discover the wines of Provence.”

The countryside surrounding Aix is known as the *Pays d’Aix*, and includes a host of cozy stone villages, rolling wine estates, and the odd goat farm or two. Around 25 minutes from the historic center, outside **Saint-Cannat** village, winery Bargemone puts on an annual Christmas market among the vines.

Marketgoers will find artisanal jewelry makers, leather goods stands, and French home decorations, alongside *vin chaud*, truffles, olive oil, honey, Corsican cheeses, and charcuterie... with a seafood stand and wine bar topping off the affair.

The domaine produces organic wines, including the region’s famous rosé varieties, like Bargemone, along with reds and whites grown in the clay-limestone *terre* of the *Pays d’Aix*. The tasting room is open during the Christmas market, with a pretty outside terrace giving visitors a clear view of Sainte-Victoire Mountain – an iconic southern landmark featured heavily in Cézanne’s paintings.

Several other wineries host their own Christmas markets, including [Domaine Tour Campanets](#), [Chateau de Beaupre](#), and [Chateau de Berne](#) (a bit farther afield near the town of Lorgues). ■

**Tuula Rampont** is *International Living*’s France correspondent. A California native, she’s lived in France since 2010.

**Editor’s note:** Christmas markets are a holiday tradition all over Europe. See *One Cruise, Four Countries, Four Magical Christmas Markets* in these pages for a unique way to experience them.

## HOW TO GET THERE

Aix-en-Provence is easily reached by shuttle from the recently remodeled Marseille airport. Connecting flights arrive from Charles de Gaulle in Paris and cities around Europe. Alternatively, December visitors can tack on a Provençal Christmas market tour to any Parisian vacation.

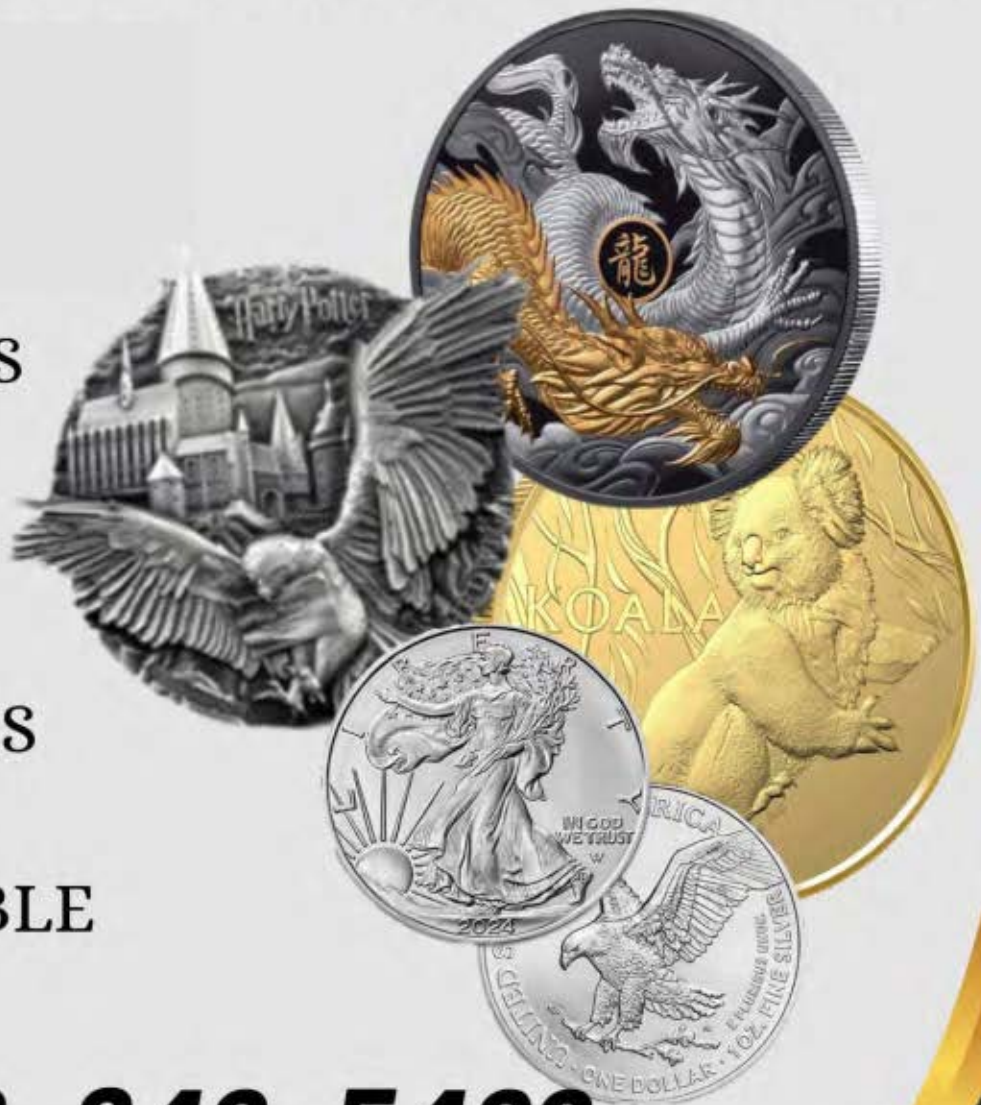
The TGV, high-speed, train departs several times a day from the Gare de Lyon train station in Paris and arrives 3 hours later at the Aix train station. Perfect for enjoying an early-afternoon rosé with your *calisson* cookie.





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### ECUADOR REAL ESTATE CONNECTION

Amy Prisco is the Broker/Owner of The Amy Prisco Agency, a full-service real estate, management and relocation consulting firm headquartered in the beach town of Salinas, Ecuador with satellite presence in the mountain town of Cotacachi. The Agency services include: purchases, sales, rentals, property area tours, management of properties, real estate consultations, as well as project oversight for small remodels or outfitting. Amy is a bilingual licensed Realtor living and working in Ecuador full-time since 2007. Originally from New York, Amy obtained her Ecuadorian citizenship back in 2020.

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From its World Class City... to the Caribbean Islands... Pacific Beaches... and Lush Mountain Towns with a Year-round Spring Climate...

# Discover Your “Have It All” Retirement in Panama—on as little as \$2,400 a Month

With 1,500 miles of Pacific and Caribbean coastline, a mild tropical climate, soaring mountains, and a thriving city... a lifestyle upgrade awaits you in Panama.

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It's quick and easy to gain residence in Panama, and there are financial incentives for retirees to do so.

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Here, you can expect to pay much less than in the US or Canada for high-quality real estate... and the same goes for medical care.

Pacífica Salud Hospital in Panama City, affiliated with Johns Hopkins International, is one of the most technologically advanced medical centers in Latin America.

And the climate is perfect—with NO hurricanes.

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program you'll find anywhere in the world today.

You don't even need to be of “official” retirement age to qualify. Just provide documentation of a guaranteed pension income of \$1,000 a month from a government agency (Social Security, disability, armed forces, etc.) or a corporation.

As a qualified *pensionado* in Panama, you're entitled to 50% off entertainment—such as movies, concerts, and sporting events... 15–25% off meals at restaurants... 20% off medical consultations... 15% off hospital bills (if no insurance applies)... and 20% off prescription medicines.

You'll also get discounts on public transport, domestic flights, and international flights originating in Panama.

In Panama, you have a chance to reinvent yourself... and do everything that you've

never had the time for.

Because when you slash your cost of living, you gain the luxury of time.

Time to do what you want when you want... time to spend with the people you love most.

In other words: you can afford to fire your boss, ditch that commute, give away your old suits, and whatever else is holding you back.

But before you do that, you need to hear from people like you... those who have faced the same decision you are now.

And when you join us at our 20th *International Living* **Fast Track Panama: Lifestyle and Opportunity Conference**, you will.

We've gathered expats who've retired, bought second homes, or started a business in Panama.

Men and women who—just

a short time ago—were in the same position you're in today.

We'll focus on the many questions you likely have: how to find a great rental, get your mail, arrange your finances, keep in touch with family and friends.

We'll talk about the documents you need to qualify for residence, the best place to buy insurance, where to buy a car, and more.

You already have the dream. Now you just need guidance.

And that's what our Panama experts will deliver at the 20th *International Living* **Fast Track Panama: Lifestyle and Opportunity Conference**—our only Panama event of 2025.

To book your seat, call 1-888-884-7792 or 1-443-353-4362 or see: [IntLiving.com/Events](https://IntLiving.com/Events). ■



An aerial photograph of Panama City, Panama, at sunset. The image shows a dense urban landscape with numerous high-rise buildings, including the prominent Panama Towers. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, indicating the time is either dawn or dusk. The city lights are beginning to glow, and the water of the Panama Canal is visible in the lower left portion of the frame.

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