

INTERNATIONAL LIVING

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HOW A TINY PIECE OF PAPER SHRANK THE WORLD.



The Penny Black was the world's first postage stamp.

Before it existed, mail was paid for by the receiver.

The Penny Black was issued in 1840, as a pre-pay method.

Much more convenient for those involved in running a large empire.

And at that time there was no Suez Canal.

It took six months to sail to India from Britain.

To receive a reply to a letter could take more than a year.

But by 1840 the Penny Black began to change all that.

A steamship would carry the mail to Alexandria, it would be taken down

the Nile to Cairo, then overland by wagon to the Sea of Suez, where it would be loaded onto another steamship to India.

The whole trip could be done in a breathtaking two months. So popular did the faster post become that in 1840, after the introduction of the Penny Black, tens of millions of letters were sent. This stamp was shrinking the world.

It remains one of the most coveted and most traded stamps there is.

After all, the first stamp printed will always be the first – and you can't print any more.

Simple economics drive prices, and demand exceeds supply.

In a supply-demand market such as this, if supply cannot be increased the price is likely only to go one way.

A paper by Elroy Dimson (London Business School and Cambridge Judge Business School) and Christophe Spaenjers (HEC Paris) showed that, last century, British stamps recorded an annualised growth of 7%, outperforming bonds and even gold*.

Now that is something to write home about.

INVEST IN HISTORY



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Investment

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Stories from Another World

MOST PEOPLE DON'T KNOW EXISTS



HERE AT *INTERNATIONAL LIVING AUSTRALIA*, we tell stories about the world nobody else tells. When somebody asks me what we do, that's what I say first. I say it because most people carry around a world view forged by the news they read. The headlines scream war and catastrophe... politics and disease. But calamity gets outsized attention.

Our news comes to us through a mainstream media lens and it's filtered by a measure of superiority. What you realise, though, once you pick up your passport and get on a plane, is that beyond our borders there exists a whole other world that the shock-seeking headlines ignore. It's a world full of promise and opportunity. A world where people live well, in beautiful surrounds...where wealth is measured less by the acquisition of stuff and more by the pleasure created in the good company of friends and family. Expats tell us all the time: I'm healthier now, less stressed, happier. You could be, too.

This month we bring you missives from all over this other world. Jason Holland explores the best spots in Belize (p. 22)—a laid-back, English-speaking, Caribbean enclave where you could live well for less than \$2,500 a month with a view of turquoise waters.

Schoolteacher Steve LePoidevin explains why he finds retirement in Chiang Mai, Thailand so gratifying (p. 8). A hub for local crafts and host to a vibrant performing-arts scene, Chiang Mai provides every modern convenience. It's a big city, yet Steve and his wife live well there for less than it would cost them to get by in a small town back home.

Friendly Ecuador (p. 12) has a welcome mat out for adventuresome folks in search of good-value living. From the market town of Otavalo, to the little beach retreat of Crucita, to the highland village of Cotacachi... you have interesting options there and we asked three expats in residence to share with you their experiences.

Mark Twain said, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness." It renders those frenzied headlines impotent, too.

Simon Munton, Executive Editor

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Flowers, Sausages and Snow Sculptures

By Conor William O'Brien

February sees **Saint Agatha's Feast Day** take place in the city of Catania, on the Italian island of Sicily. The patron saint of the area, St. Agatha died at age 15 in the 3rd century, and every February 4 commences with a mass held at dawn in her name. Her statue is then given pride of place atop a massive silver carriage and carried to the top of Mount Sangiuliano by over 5,000 men. The ensuing days offer the chance to enjoy Sicilian food and wine, and the ceremony closes with a massive fireworks display.

From February 11 to 17, you can experience the magic of **Carnaval** without going to Rio. You can turn up to Mexico instead. It too is noted for its carnival celebrations, which take place in cities across the country. The most notable **Carnavales** take place in Veracruz, Mazatlán, and Mérida. You'll have an exciting selection of parades, displays, live music, and cuisine to choose from, as the party atmosphere sweeps the nation.

With the Chinese New Year celebrations in full swing this February, now is still a great time to explore the cultural treasures of the Orient. The **Huayi Festival** in Singapore offers a terrific chance to do just that. Lasting from February 6 to 16, the event takes place in the Esplanade Theatre in Singapore City, and features an eclectic mix of Chinese dance, opera, and performing arts.

February 17 this year also marks **Pancake Day**, and London is one of the best cities in the world in which to celebrate this Shrove-Tuesday tradition. Numerous eateries across the city will offer delicious pancakes for you to choose from. There will also be pancake races to take part in, provided you think you can outrun a few dozen other contenders while flipping a pancake in a frying pan!

Spain has long been renowned for its distinct musical tradition. A huge part of that heritage is flamenco music, native to Andalusia, in southern Spain. Spain's sherry capital, the town of Jerez de la Frontera, plays host to the world's leading **Flamenco Festival**, which kicks off on February 24. Meet highly talented guitarists, dancers, and singers as they descend upon the town

to perform. If you're musically inclined, you can also attend workshops in the art of flamenco.

Thailand's resplendent flora will form the focal point of celebrations at the annual **Chiang Mai Flower Festival**, from February 6 to 8. As well as displays awash with a stunning variety of colour, there will be floats adorned with flowers prepared by hill tribes in traditional dress. For nature lovers, February is a perfect time to visit Chiang Mai, as it is one of the best times of year to explore the region's diverse birdlife.

The town of Boquete, in Chiriquí Province, Panama, will play host to Panama's pre-eminent **Jazz & Blues Festival** from February 4 to 8. Surrounded by nature and the spectacular sights afforded

by Panama's tallest peak, the Volcán Barú, the festival draws artists from across Latin America and the world, guaranteeing a myriad of musical talent for you to enjoy. You'll also have the chance to mingle with locals and expats alike.

The beautiful town of Menton, on the French Riviera, is the venue for one of Europe's most unusual yearly celebrations. Each February the **Lemon Festival** sees dancers, floats, and processions commemorate the citrus fruit the festival is named for. Over 145 tonnes of lemons are imported for the event, which begins February 14. During the festival, buildings and monuments throughout the town are coated with lemons. There is also a splendid light display. ■

Notes from an Offbeat World...

Suits and Noodles in Hoi An, Vietnam

By Eoin Bassett



The best tailors in town, An Dong Silk will make you a suit for \$90.

"A gift to the mouth," or *an qua* in Vietnamese... That's what locals call the noodle dish of *cao lau*. And the only place in the world you can eat it is the town of Hoi An in central Vietnam. Once a major South China Sea port, Hoi An was for centuries home to wealthy Japanese and Chinese traders. Their 16th- and 17th-century timber-fronted shophouses are the main attraction of the town today, lining narrow, red-lantern-lit streets where locals in

conical *non la* hats lounge in doorways.

The chewy noodles used in *cao lau* are made from water found only in an ancient local well. No two sources agree on which well is used, but my money's on the Bá Le well at the end of an alley opposite 35 Phan Chau Trinh street. The noodles are soaked in a type of lye solution made from the ash of the *tro* trees that grow on the Cham Islands about 30 kilometres offshore. To try *cao lau* find the street vendor on Nguyen Hue street. This old woman's been in business for decades and *cao lau* is all she sells.

I also picked up a few silk shirts in Hoi An as the town is full of tailors. I recommend An Dong silk (Adongsilk.com). I found them after some trial and error with other local outfits. The "trial" involved a matronly tailor trying to join me in the dressing room—not appropriate in any culture. And the "error" was another tailor forgetting to add buttons. But given the quality and low prices of An Dong, my only regret is not buying a full wardrobe. ■

GLOBETROTTER

News & Notes from Around the World



© GLYNNA PRENTICE

Belize's culture, climate and range of landscapes make it a perfect expat destination.

On the Cover This Month...

Although world-renowned for its idyllic Caribbean beaches, Belize has a lot more to offer than just sun, sea, and sand. For a country about a third of the size of Tassie, it harbours incredible diversity. Ambergris Caye and Caye Caulker define the words “island paradise.” You can explore the exotic jungles of the Cayo District or relax in the thriving expat hub of Placencia. Plus, the country's growing expat communities makes it easy to make new friends.

Other factors play their part: The low cost of living ensures comfort on a budget, and Belize is English-speaking, meaning there's no problem mixing with the welcoming locals. For the full story on the best places to live in Belize, check out page 22. ■

Tour Dublin with a Local

Thousands of tourists flock to the fair city of Dublin each year to soak up its rich cultural heritage and authentic Irish charm. Now, seeing the sights of Dublin in comfort is a snap, with the recent launch of Dublin Cityscape Luxury Sightseeing Tours.

This new hop-on, hop-off service departs every 15 minutes from the city centre. You are guided by locals intimately acquainted with Dublin's history and heritage, and whose own background is in archaeology, history, journalism, sports, or other fields. While on board, you can enjoy leather seats, air conditioning, climate control, WiFi, refreshments, and restrooms, making for a comfortable and enjoyable experience.

Tickets are \$38 per person for three days' travel, with a family package (two adults and four children) available for around \$76. You'll get a 30% discount if you buy online at Cityscapetours.ie.



© NICOLE BUCKLER

Rainforest at Night



© EDELMANISTOCK

Sometimes the most interesting way to experience a new environment is in the dark (yes, you do get to use a flashlight). In the cloud forest of the Monteverde region of Costa Rica, night hikes offer the chance to see nocturnal creatures that stay hidden during the day. During guided tours, you glimpse kinkajous high in the trees, poison dart frogs huddled under leaves, birds sleeping on branches, orange-kneed tarantulas gingerly exiting their hillside burrows.

Turn off the lights and you can see you're surrounded by glow-in-the-dark moss on the trees. Several operators offer guided night hikes. A great tour can be found at the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve (Reservamonteverde.com). And if you're visiting another part of Costa Rica, be sure to check if it has its own version of the tour.

Highest Outdoor Bar

Scared of heights? Then back away from this restaurant. Soaring 63 floors above the Thai capital, Bangkok, Sirocco Moroccan Restaurant at the Lebua Hotel holds the honour of being the highest alfresco restaurant in the world.

Perched on a precipice 250 metres in the air, the rooftop restaurant overlooks the city. It serves food against the background of The Dome—a Pantheon-like structure built on the top of the Lebua Hotel skyscraper with mind-boggling aerial views.

There is also a cocktail bar nearby (on a 25-metre neon-lit sky-bridge) which gives you the opportunity to watch rock-star mixologists make concoctions that probably aren't such a good idea this high up. A cocktail called the Hangovertini was created here for the cast of *The Hangover Part II* while they were filming at the hotel. Like the Singapore Sling, it is now Thailand's signature drink.

See: Lebua.com/sirocco.



© LEBUA.COM

Feel Good in Panama



© JESSICA RAMESCH

It's official: Panama is now the number-one country in the world in terms of well-being. That's according to Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index. The factors taken into account are sense of purpose, social connectivity, community, finances, and physical vigour.

Costa Rica came second in the index. Countries were ranked on the number of respondents who reported to be thriving in at least three of the five measured categories. Panama topped the pile with 61%. Costa Rica had 44%, followed by Denmark (40%), and Austria and Brazil (both 39%).

The U.S. was 12th, with 33% of people reporting themselves as thriving. Latin America scored well in the poll, with six countries—Panama, Costa Rica, Brazil, Uruguay, El Salvador, and Guatemala—finishing in the top 10. Northern Europe also performed strongly. Australia ranked 23rd out of 135 countries assessed.



Gourmet Odyssey enables you to adopt vines from an organic French vineyard and partake in the wine-making process.

Rent a Vine in France

Do you like wine? Here's a more meaningful French winemaking experience than the usual tasting tour... You can "adopt" several grapevines from a high-quality, organic vineyard in France, follow their growth, participate in the wine-making process, and receive personalised bottles of the wine your vines help produce.

Here's how it works: Company Gourmet Odyssey organises your adoption of six to 36 vines for one wine-making year from a vineyard in your favourite French wine-making region. Choose from Burgundy, Chablis, Bordeaux, Alsace, Languedoc, or the Loire or Rhone Valleys. You can either follow the grapes' development via the Internet or select a "Wine Experience Day," in which you (and a guest) visit the vineyard and actively participate in the winemaking process. You choose the type of Wine Day Experience you'd like to have.

Options may include hands-on activities such as pruning and treating your vines, participating in the harvest, or learning about the wine-making process through analysing the wine's characteristics. No matter which you choose, you'll gain insider knowledge of the vintner's life and the wine-making cycle—not to mention a bottle of wine for each vine you adopt. Packages start from \$250. Travel and accommodation are not included. For more information, visit: Gourmetodyssey.com.

*Receive bottles
of the wine your
vines produced."*

The Savvy Traveller's Corner



Know Where to Eat High-End in Havana, Cuba

Fadi Garcia

If you visit Havana, it's crucial to know exactly where to eat. That's because there are no concierges for directions, no Yelp service to read reviews and no signs advertising the restaurant's best features. In fact, until recently there were no options for a high-end meal at all. But that's all changing. Cuba is opening up to Cuban entrepreneurs...and the best way to see it is through dining.

If you're making the trip then you should visit these restaurants...

La Fontana was the first high-end restaurant in Havana. You'll see a fountain when you enter (La Fontana means "the fountain"). But watch your step, most of the restaurant is a giant koi pond and you walk on stones as you pass through.

The food is great and sharing appetisers is the way to eat there. I went for an octopus dish served in an onion and red pepper sauce, a clay bowl of fried chickpeas infused with pork chorizo and a perfectly sliced beef *carpaccio* with capers and parmesan cheese.

El Cocinero is in Miramar around Calle 11 and Calle 26. There's a round smoke stack like you'd see in an old power plant. That's the restaurant. And if you climb into the smoke stack you'll see it's been turned into a private dining area that's very interesting.

The food is great and waitresses bring trays of cigars to the table. Feel free to smoke a Montecristo #2 during dinner...and pay just \$12 for it (you'll pay \$32 for the same in Australia). Here I ate a combination of mixed-meat skewers and chicken skewers with bacon and pineapple.

Rio Mar, located at the ground floor of a mid-century apartment building where 3rd avenue dead ends into an area known as La Puntilla (meaning "the tip"), is run by an entrepreneur who splits her time between Havana and Miami. The food is fantastic and lunchtime is definitely the time to go, especially if you want to enjoy some cool sea breezes while sipping a mojito. Here I started with a seafood *carpaccio* in basil and pineapple vinaigrette and ended it with a very nice grilled lobster dish with coriander leaves and lemon zest.



Though not a traditional culinary capital, Havana's quaint restaurants offer a unique and savoury dining experience.

The Best Market for 100% Gains

By Steve Sjoggerud, *DailyWealth.com*

“Chinese stocks have the potential to deliver triple-digit returns within 24 months,” I explained in a recent TV interview. That was a bold thing to say on camera...but I believe it’s absolutely possible... In fact, twice in the last decade, Chinese stocks have soared by triple digits within two years. When China goes up, it can soar...

In China’s 2006-2007 bull market, Chinese stocks soared by 500%. It soared by more than 100% in its 2009 bull market as well. Importantly, Chinese stocks today are just as cheap as they were when they started their last two triple-digit runs in 2006 and 2009. They are hated, too... Investors have been avoiding them for the last year. Meanwhile, Chinese stocks are now in a definite uptrend. This is the ideal setup for big gains...

Chinese Composite Index



Nazareen Heazle says there are still bargain buys in three Spanish mountain towns, on page 10.

Alexander Hayter says you can start collecting limited-edition fine art with just \$1,860, on page 30.

LONG-TERM INVESTMENTS

Don't Ignore 'Boring', Low-Tech Companies

“Which stocks do you think have risen the most between 1987’s Black Friday and today?” Asks *MoneyMorning.com.au*’s Tim Dohrmann. “You’ve probably never heard of the hardware supply firm **Fastenal Company** [NADSAQ:FAST].

The humble Minnesota-based company doesn’t hit too many radars on this side of the world.

“If you bought just US\$10,000 worth of Fastenal shares in 1987 and reinvested your dividends, by now you’d be sitting on a stake worth more than US\$4.3 million. But because Fastenal makes its money from relatively low-tech, low-fanfare activities, many investors have wrongly ignored the stock and its peers.

Twenty-seven years might seem like more than a lifetime ago. But the way life expectancies are growing, you could now reasonably expect more than 27 good years after your retirement. That means you should always keep an eye on long-term stock market performance.” ■

INDONESIA IS ‘BUY’

Our Neighbour will Thrive in 2015

Indonesia is Australia’s closest and biggest neighbour, and the fourth most populous country in the world. Amid the current global commodity deflation, Indonesia is pulling through wonderfully. It is growing on the back of organic growth, industrialisation, investments and promises of reform.

The Jakarta index has tracked the model forecast closely in the past few years. Like India, it is still in that hyper-growth stage, and it’s not meeting any serious obstacles yet. My recommendation is a ‘buy’ for the Indonesian index, as well as great individual stocks in Indonesia. One way to track the index is with the iShares **MSCI Indonesia** [NYSE:EIDO]. I believe Indonesia is going to perform in the 10% to 20% range in 2015. However, Indonesian President Joko Widodo can easily make that performance even sharper if he is able to push through some tough reforms.—
Ken Wandong, New Frontier Investor. ■

Play the Organics Revolution

By Greg Guenthner, *ContrarianProfits.com*

According to Grand View Research, the organic food and beverages market will spike to about \$259.62 billion by 2020. That's a full 16% higher than today. And since few investors see the potential in these stocks right now, we'll be among the first ones on the gravy train...

Investors have bludgeoned McDonalds stock after the fast food giant reported slumping sales this year. Partner-in-crime Coca-Cola is also taking it on the chin. After posting disappointing earnings and a terrible full-year outlook last month, Coke shares took their worst one-day hit since October 2008. Here's some more bad news for Coke—per capita consumption of soft drink is down almost 30 per cent since its peak in 1998, according to IBIS World.

Consumers are clearly looking for healthier alternatives, and there's a growing demand for "green" organic and hormone-free foods. About 70 per cent of Americans are buying some form of organic food now, according to the Hartman Group. Recently, shares of The Fresh Market (NASDAQ:TFM) jumped more than 6 per cent in just a few hours thanks to a timely short squeeze.

But as usual, there are much bigger trends brewing beneath this one-day move. Companies are realising they need to shift focus to healthier options or watch their market share evaporate. Unless you want to give your portfolio a coronary, you need to drop the junk food stocks. And don't worry—there are plenty of names in the organic grocery business you can pick up today.

Keep an Eye On... Brazil's Recovery

By Ken Wandong, *New Frontier Investor*

A number of factors contributed to the 'defeat' of Brazil in 2014. From manufacturing to export, to services, consumption and prices, everything went into negative gear. The central bank even lifted interest rates despite the difficult times for the economy. And don't forget the effect of commodity deflation on a commodity exporter such as Brazil.

Despite a downgrade in growth outlook for the country in the coming years, I think the worst is over for Brazil. They're not out of the woods yet; however, the current downturn is a great value-buy opportunity for investors. Given the current level of the stock market, things can hardly get much worse. In a poor performance scenario, the market should still return 3% in 2015. That indicates the market has dropped to—or close to—a bottom. If the economy turns around in 2015, you should see a recovery on the stock market that is close to a 30% to 40% gain.

Any better performance is unlikely for 2015. Don't think that Brazil will just magically heal itself; it has its own structural problems. However, at the current level, the Brazilian market has a good chance of recovering in 2015 and providing investors with healthy gains.

Thai Rail

Thailand's railway system is more than a century old and hasn't seen a thorough upgrade for countless decades. But a new rail project is on the horizon, and smart investors stand to gain, says *MoneyWeek.com*'s Lars Henriksson. "The 867 kilometre railway project is estimated to cost Bt400bn (\$15bn) and this is part of Thailand's infrastructure plan between 2015 and 2022. The construction of the dual-track railway is hoped to begin in 2016. The salient point is that the civil work—worth about 40% of the total cost—will have to be done by local contractors. Given the big size there will be a number of local contractors which are set to benefit."

Large, experienced construction contractors operating in Thailand could benefit the most.

Beijing's New Airport

As part of its long-term efforts to sustain growth, China recently approved the construction of a \$16 billion new airport in Beijing. The project will take five years to finish. By 2025, the new airport is expected to accommodate 72 million passengers and 2.2 million tons of cargo per year.

The airport is just one facet of China's attempts to augment its infrastructure as the country opens up to foreign investment. A further \$18 billion has been assigned to improving roads in the south and west of the country. All of this will help the country attract and sustain investment over the coming decades, building on years of growth that has already seen China become a major investment opportunity.

Mexico Looks Promising

James McKeigue of *MoneyWeek.com* says despite the usual political tensions in Mexico, there are many long-term reasons for liking the country as an investment opportunity.

"It's a manufacturing powerhouse that's closely integrated with the U.S. and a play on the recovery there.

Throw in its welter of mineral and hydrocarbon wealth, and a young and growing population, and it's clear that Mexico is heading in the right direction.

As for the politics, I believe that Peña Nieto will ride out the storm," McKeigue says.

Exchange traded funds could provide access to the market.

New-Generation Batteries

"What would you say to a battery that can recharge in minutes—and hold a charge for a useful period of time?" writes Bengt Saelensminde of *MoneyWeek.com*. "Imagine a car that you can recharge in the same time it takes to fill a tank of gas. Scientists at Singapore

University's School of Materials Science and Engineering have fine-tuned the current lithium-ion battery. With this small change, we're promised battery lifespans of 20 years or more." So how do we play it? There are companies sitting on lithium resources stretching into the tens of billions of dollars—yet these companies are valued at a lowly \$55 million. A tiny part of your portfolio dedicated to this could prove to be seriously beneficial.

Low-Cost Life in Thailand's "Rose of the North"

By Steve LePoidevin



Each morning I wake to a symphony of songbirds and roosters. Somehow, my wife, Nancy, usually sleeps through this, but for me it's the start of another relaxed day in retirement. We live in a 90-square-metre apartment in the centre of Chiang Mai, the principal city in northern Thailand. We have two balconies overlooking a large wooded farm—an uncommon rural oasis in this growing city. Despite this, we're close to everything—trendy cafés, glitzy malls, and craft beer pubs.

Living in the centre of a modern city for less than the price of many small towns back home is one of the reasons we like it here. Our delicious coffee is locally grown and we get it at a small shop nearby for about \$16 a kilo. It's easy to head out to the street to pick up a fresh bag of sticky rice and a few skewers of barbecued meat for a couple of dollars. By 7 a.m., the street vendors on every corner are serving hungry customers, both local and foreign. If we're feeling lazy and want a slice of home, there's no shortage of

restaurants serving enormous, tasty, Western-style breakfasts from as low as \$2 for the basic eggs, bacon, and toast.

Ten years ago, I would have laughed if you'd told me that I would retire in Asia. I was a successful teacher in the prime of my long career, looking forward to retiring in a rural setting back home. Then, in 2007, I decided it would be fun to teach overseas. I had spent a year teaching in Scotland in 1996 and enjoyed it. Shortly after posting my résumé online, I was offered a post in Wuhan, China, teaching science and math at a new international school. Over the next six years, we lived in an exciting city of 10 million people at small-town prices, and we travelled throughout Asia. We fell in love with Southeast-Asian culture and the people.

When I reached age 60 in China, it became more difficult to renew my work visa. I decided that 30 years in the classroom was enough. We had no interest in returning back home. And living in

As well as the historic Tha Phae Gate, the city of Chiang Mai also features excellent dining and low-cost rentals.



The locals are friendly and accepting.”

a large city in a warm climate, with the lifestyle we'd enjoyed in China, was too expensive. We narrowed down our choices to Central America and Southeast Asia.

We already lived close to Thailand, so it seemed a good

starting point. Chiang Mai made a lot of sense. It has a large, active expat club that meets regularly, with many smaller interest groups under its umbrella. The locals seem friendly and, for the most part, very accepting of foreigners moving in. I personally loved that it is a hub for many local crafts, and is home to a vibrant performing-arts community. Also, as addicts to anything on two wheels, we knew that the countryside surrounding the city is renowned for having some of the best motorcycle touring roads in the world.

Trying out retired life in Chiang Mai is easy and fairly commitment-free. Short-term rentals at good prices are easy to find. And obtaining a renewable, one-year retirement visa is simple. Finding a place to live was easy. Small houses and studio apartments can be found for as low as \$250 to \$370 a month. However, lower-priced properties tend to be outside the city proper.

Like many people, we dreamt of a little house in a tropical paradise when we first started looking. With the help of an agency, we found a new, Thai-style home on a large property with three other family-owned homes. In the pictures, it was gorgeous, and in real life, the gardens did not disappoint. For \$740 a month, we had a two-storey house, full-time gardeners, four balconies that looked out over tropical foliage, and a friendly, extended family to help us out. However, several months into our lease, we realised that it was not all wine and roses. The first-floor concrete structure maintained humidity and we had too many spidery house guests for our liking.

Luckily, Chiang Mai has other options. So we moved to our one-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment and the monthly rent is less than \$740, including the body corporate fee. There is also a large outdoor pool and several businesses on the first floor, including a couple of restaurants, coffee shops, and a massage parlour. Trendy Nimmanhemmin road, with its upscale condos and eateries, designer boutiques, and popular bars, is only a 10-minute walk away. At the corner of Nimman is the new Maya Mall, where we go every week to watch the latest blockbusters. The same theatre hosts an International Film Festival every year, where you can watch current films from around the world for no admission fee. Walking in the other direction takes us to the charming old part of town, which is surrounded by a 700-year-old moat and is home to most of the city's 300 Buddhist temples.

The old city really comes alive every Sunday, when Ratchadomoen Road becomes a walking street, complete with a craft market, local dancers, and musicians. Soon after we arrived, we bought a Honda PCX150 scooter to get around. The total cost, including registration and insurance, was less than \$3,070. It lets us get to out-of-the-way places surrounding the city. Within a 30- or 40-minute drive, we can cool off in mountain streams and waterfalls in the numerous nearby parks.

There is plenty here to keep us busy. Chiang Mai has always been known as one of the main cultural hubs of Thailand. You'll find many art and cultural displays throughout the year, both at local galleries and at the many annual festivals. More than 30,000 expats

COSTS, VISAS, AND HEALTH CARE IN CHIANG MAI, THAILAND

Rental properties are available at many price points in Chiang Mai. Furnished apartments and houses rent for as little as \$370 a month; larger apartments in the main part of town are \$620 or \$740 a month and up.

Chiang Mai has several good hospitals. Health insurance starts at \$125 a month for very basic coverage. It's not unusual to walk into a hospital and be talking to a specialist within half an hour. For a leisurely consultation, you will pay \$35 to \$50. There is very little wait time for most medical procedures, and they cost a fraction of what you would pay in Western countries.

We pay \$50 a month for high-speed Internet (20Mbps), but lower bandwidth can be found for less than \$25 a month. Electricity averages around \$75, and we spend \$12 to \$18 a month for bulk bottled water. Cable TV packages are available for \$25 to \$75 a month, but we purchased an Android TV box for \$310 instead.

In addition to the many markets and street vendors, Chiang Mai has more than 1,000 restaurants. A decent restaurant meal for two will set you back at least \$12 to \$18, and more if you have alcohol. From there, the sky is the limit. Most countries' cuisine is available here, and restaurants range from basic family eateries to upscale fine-dining establishments. Wine is quite expensive, but beer is \$1.20 or \$2.50 a bottle. Tropical fruits and vegetables are cheap, especially if you buy them at the local markets. Many markets also carry fresh fish and other seafood. Several well-known grocery stores around town sell most Western foods and brands.

For valid tourists, a tourist visa and/or 30-day stamps is an option for a visit of up to three months. But everyone else now needs to get one of the long-term visas available to those who meet the requirements for work, business, or retirement. I'm familiar with what's usually referred to as a retirement visa (technically a Non-Immigrant Visa, "O-A"). You must be at least 50 years old to get this visa. Financially, you must have either 800,000 baht (\$30,500) in a Thai savings account or a monthly pension of at least 65,000 baht (\$2,475), or a combination of the two. Other than that, you must report to immigration every 90 days. This visa currently costs 5,000 baht (\$190).

live in the city, and the active expat club holds monthly meetings. Its local interest groups include everything from hiking to computers to photography. Add the abundance of volunteer opportunities, classes of all sorts, and inexpensive trips to nearby exotic locations, and time passes quickly.

We have grown to love the wonderful people, food, and climate of Southeast Asia. If we tire of the city, we can jump on a plane for less than \$130 and have dinner on the beach in the town of Hua Hin or on the island of Koh Lanta by day's end. We loved visiting Thailand during our holidays when we were working full time. Being on holiday every day is even better. ■

Bargain Buys in Three Spanish Mountain Towns

By Nazareen Heazle

It's a sun-drenched morning as I stand at a lookout point above the town of Mijas. Below me, the gleaming white buildings, with their roofs of rust-red tile, tumble down the mountainside. The pine-covered hills of the Sierra de Mijas mountain range reach up into the clear sky to my right. On my left, I can see the Costa del Sol—the Sun Coast—with the glittering Mediterranean Sea stretching to the horizon. It's a comfortable 18 degrees here in Mijas, which is located in southernmost Spain.

With more than 2,800 hours of sunshine a year around these parts, it's the perfect place to enjoy the sun for long spells of time. And it's affordable. A couple can live well for under \$3,000 a month, including \$745 in rent. You can own your own little piece of romantic Spain for less than \$137,000.

If you're looking for a full- or part-time escape, complete with all the romance of the Old World, then look no further than Mijas and its sister mountain towns in Andalusia. This part of Spain is already a popular snowbird destination for Europeans. Just a short drive away from pretty towns like Mijas is the hustle and bustle of the Costa del Sol. But up here, life is slow, unhurried, and more authentic. Mijas is my personal favourite. Cornflower-blue pots brimming with pink flowers dot the town, and tropical-green palm trees surround the main square. Málaga's international airport is just a 20-minute drive away. But Mijas manages to maintain its Andalusian look and feel.

You can visit the remains of a 14th- and 15th-century fortress opposite the town's bullring. (Make sure you climb the rickety spiral staircase to the top to get a bird's-eye view of the town's lofty position.) Over the years, Mijas

has drawn the creative set to its hilltop. Bright store windows offer handcrafted silver jewellery inlaid with gemstones and intricately made glass bowls in various colours. It's no secret that Spain's property market has been at rock-bottom the last few years, but it's slowly starting to pick up here in Mijas. Buyers, mostly from Western Europe, are making their way back to southern Spain. They are buying with a view to retiring to the area. (Mijas already has a very international community...I

"There's a good choice of rentals at affordable prices too."

met an Irish woman who runs a chocolate shop and a relocation consultant who's originally from England.) That's good news if you like the idea of living here. There's a good choice of rentals at affordable prices. And, despite the return of the European snowbirds, there are still plenty of great-value properties for sale. I came across a two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment right in town for €85,000 (\$124,530). Living here puts you close to all the shops, and the apartment also has a private patio area, perfect for enjoying the year-round sun. Also in the centre of town is a penthouse apartment with two bedrooms and a balcony, with views of the village and the sea in the distance, listed for €99,000 (\$145,000).

On the edge of Mijas, a one-bedroom



Scenic mountain towns like Torrox have great-value real estate to rent and buy.

one-bathroom, furnished apartment, with a communal pool and gardens, can be yours to rent for just €450 (\$660) a month. It also has a terrace with views to the village and the coast beyond. If you want to be right in the village, I found a two-bedroom, two-bathroom, fully furnished apartment in the centre of town for €500 (\$735) a month.

If you'd like a town that's more Spanish and less international, then about a 30-minute drive west of Mijas is the unassuming little town of Ojén. Another of Andalusia's white towns, Ojén has a small-town vibe and is quieter than Mijas. It's sandwiched between the Blanca and Alpujata mountain ranges, clinging to the verdant green Andalusian hills. With its tiered, narrow, cobblestone streets, the town's signature white buildings almost look as though they're piggybacking one another. The town's name comes from an Arabic word meaning a rough or bitter place. But when you stand in the old town, it's hard to believe that this place was ever that way.

Ojén has a "real" Spanish-town feel to it. It's peaceful here in the mid-afternoon, as shops close for the traditional siesta. You'll hear the clink of coffee cups



coming from the tiny cafés, as the locals relax during the afternoon. An occasional car squeezes past on one of the slim, steep streets. In the distance, the excited chatter of school children can be heard, as they're released from their day's classes. The pace of life up here is slow and steady.

Finding rentals in Ojén isn't easy. This is a small town and doesn't have much of an expat presence. But I did find a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment in the upper town, with a terrace that boasts views of the village below and the Marbella coast in the distance. (The glitzy resort town is just a 15-minute drive down the hill.) The apartment rents for €500 (\$735) a month. This same apartment is also for sale, with an asking price of €160,000 (\$234,400). I also came across a two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment that has a fully fitted kitchen, marble floors in the living area, and underground parking for €88,000 (\$128,950). This would make a great holiday or long-term rental.

Both Mijas and Ojén are close to the coast and the resort town of Marbella. If you need a dose of "big-town" activity or fancy a dip in the Mediterranean, it's less than a 30-minute drive away. A bustling town of around 140,000, Marbella has everything you could want as an expat... big-name grocery stores, a glut of restaurants and cafés, clothing stores from upscale Gucci to mainstream Zara, and a hospital. Real estate in Marbella is more expensive than up in the mountains. This is where the European elite decamp for their fix of fun in the sun. But it's still affordable. Properties for sale start at around €139,000 (\$203,650) for a one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment about a 10-minute walk from the beach and promenade.

Closer to the water (a block away) I found a one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment for €210,000 (\$307,660). Long-term rentals are affordable, too, for a high-end resort town. I saw a furnished, one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment, with 50 square metres of living space, with views of the promenade and beach from a covered terrace, which rents for €800 (\$1,170) a month. If you want something a bit bigger and don't mind a 10-minute walk to the beach, a two-bedroom apartment with one bathroom in 70 square metres, with a shared pool and garden, is renting for €1,000 (\$1,465) a month.

If you like the idea of living in one of

Tips and Contacts for Buying and Renting in Southern Spain

Finding good-value real estate and rentals in southern Spain can be a challenge. The real estate scene here is very fragmented, with agents specialising in specific areas, sometimes even down to the neighbourhood. If you want to do some research before you arrive, there are some useful websites for this part of Spain. The best are *Hiperprop.com* and *Kyero.com*.

When you get on the ground, keep an eye out for real estate offices as you explore. Many of these you may not find online. Also, walking around, I noticed *Se Vende* (For Sale) signs hanging from buildings, with the contact details of the real estate agency selling the property. If you're looking to rent, keep in mind that long-term rental rates (12 months) are generally much lower than short-term rates, which are quoted by the week or month. If you buy a property and want to rent it out part-time when you're not using it, you'll need to get a rental license to do so.

Here are some other resources:

these alluring mountain towns but want to be even closer to the beach, then Torrox ticks all these boxes. This peaceful *pueblo* (town) is located 40 minutes east of Málaga and about an hour from Marbella. It's also less than a 10-minute drive from the beach of Ferrara Playa. It offers great-value real estate, with townhouses from €117,200 (\$101,600) and long-term rentals from as low as €375 (\$550) a month. In the heart of town, Plaza de la Constitución is a fabulously elegant square that's home to Torrox's town hall and a handful of outdoor cafés. Rising up behind the town hall is a terracotta-coloured church with a striped yellow-and-green bell tower roof, standing in stark contrast to the gleaming white village it overlooks.

A three-bedroom townhouse in the village is currently on the market for €80,000 (\$117,200). Located on the main square, this traditional, white-washed house also has a bathroom, a large living room, and a spacious terrace with views of the surrounding hills. If your budget stretches a little further, for €118,000 (\$172,875) you can get another white house that was recently renovated. This one has living space over three floors, with two bedrooms,

Mijas Real Estate: *Mijasrealestate.com*.

The office is just down from the tourist office. The company has a good selection of sales and rentals for Mijas town and the surrounding area.

Competa Properties S.L., Torrox: *Competaproperties.com*. Located right on the main square, Plaza de la Constitución, it deals in rentals as well as sales.

Nevado Realty: *Nevadomarbella.com*. Based in Marbella, it deals mainly in properties in towns along the coast.

Lisa Sadleir, relocation consultant: Lisa has lived in Mijas for seven years, is very involved with the local community, and knows the real estate scene here well. Contact her at: *Movetomalagaspain.com*.

If you're interested in renting out your Spanish home as a vacation rental, a good resource for homeowners is *Spain-holiday.com/rentalbuzz*. It covers topics such as rental licenses, how to market your rental, and much more.

a bathroom, an open-plan kitchen/dining room, and two roof terraces (one covered) with mountain and village views.

If you want to spend only part of the year living in Torrox, and you'd like your house to earn you a little extra cash when you're not there, consider turning it into a holiday rental. While long-term rentals are plentiful here, holiday rentals are scarce. And this is a town that's a pleasure to spend time in...even for a week or two. I found a three-bedroom townhouse, for instance, that rents for €350 (\$510) a week in low season and €550 (\$805) in high season. In the village centre, a long-term rental is going for €390 (\$570) a month. The apartment has three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and beautiful views from all the rooms, as they all open onto one of two terraces—one of which faces the ocean and the other, the village itself.

Living in Torrox would give you the best of both worlds...the romance and intrigue of a Moorish town, but still just minutes from the coast and all the amenities you'd need for everyday living. I'd happily live here, and the good-value real estate prices make it all the more tempting. ■

Finding a Rural Idyll in the Old World

“The Right Mix of Amenities and Small-Town Feel”

Names: Tricia and Keith Pimental

Ages: 63 and 55

Living in: Famalicão, Northern Portugal

A herd of goats files into the pasture below my patio. The flock leaps over the stream, threading its way through the field. They butt each other in exuberance as I savour my morning coffee and fresh rolls with creamy butter. It's 10 a.m. but I only know that because that's when the milking finishes in the animals' ancient stone quarters across the road. Distant bells from the village church are also a clue.

Like the goats, I'm exuberant: after years of visiting Europe, I'm now living here. Although my husband, Keith, and I considered moving abroad in the past, it wasn't until I lost my job as assistant to an attorney that we began to look seriously. My pension and Keith's income were fine, but not enough to continue to pay the mortgage and living expenses back home. So we rented a furnished two-bedroom, two-bathroom cottage with fireplace and a swimming pool in northern Portugal. That was two years ago and we're still here.

If I had to choose one word to describe the difference between life here and back home, it would be “relaxed.” Much of this country is filled with gently rolling hills and terraced farm land; pine trees, palm trees, and water (on every road trip, you're guaranteed to cross a river or two—or three). Our locale is no exception. Vila Nova de Famalicão, with a population of 132,000, is the nearest city to us—a mere seven minutes' drive—with just the right mix of urban amenities and small-town feel. There are roundabouts with statues and fountains, cobblestoned tree-lined streets, parks, boutiques, gyms, hair salons, and outdoor cafés to suit everyone's taste, even if you're not a fan of bacalhau, the salted cod so dear to the Portuguese heart.

A typical day involves coffee and email catch-up, outdoors if possible, and at least one walk and a drive, perhaps to a

neighbouring town to view its castle or cathedral. At home, I write (I'm working on my third book), and Keith attends to his financial-management job working remotely. When we want a break, we need only walk a few minutes from the farm into Cruz, where there's a church, two cafés, a convenience store, and an open green with stone picnic benches where villagers gather to play chess, enjoy coffee, and catch up on neighbourhood news.

We pay \$1,010 a month to rent our cottage. That includes utilities, weekly linen and maid service, and firewood. Portugal's third-largest city, Braga, is 20 minutes away by car, and rentals there can be found for less than \$635. Electricity and water are included in our deal and Internet and cable costs \$50. Health insurance varies from expat international programs to in-country programs and is very inexpensive compared to back home.

**“We pay \$1,010
a month to rent
our cottage.”**

As life here is so affordable we can eat out often. Lunch, including soup, main course, dessert, wine or beer and coffee generally costs around \$11. A complete dinner for two at a high-end place will cost about \$50. If you want a sandwich or slice of pizza and a drink at a café/snack bar, expect to pay about \$5. A cup of good espresso is a dollar.

All foreign citizens intending to remain in Portugal for a period of up to one year, or to establish their residence for more than one year, must request the respective long-stay visa from the Portuguese embassy in their country of residence. (Under the Schengen Agreement, Australians can remain in participating countries of the European Union 90 days out of any given 180, but since our rental was for six months with an option to renew, we needed more

time.) Necessary items were a signed lease, proof of sufficient funds with which to support ourselves, and a Portuguese bank account. Once there, we established a banking connection, and in less than two months had renewable residence cards.

“Perfect for a Stroll Along the Beach”

Names: Leonie Whitton and David Westbuy

Ages: 75 and 65

Living in: Puglia, Italy

For Leonie Whitton and David Westbuy, the biggest advantage of being in Puglia, at the heel of Italy, is access to fresh, delicious food. “We can source most food stuffs within 25 kilometres. Here, farmers are still growing olives and produce and you can buy direct in the area. It is the opposite of the supermarket culture,” says Leonie. In fact, the couple themselves produce some of their own food. From their olive trees, they can make more than a year's supply of extra virgin olive oil. Leonie makes jams and marmalades from the fruit of the orange, loquat and lemon trees on their property. They have fresh herbs, a small vegetable garden and five chickens provide fresh eggs.

Their house wine is from a local winemaker who grows only traditional Puglia grapes. The other food is all local, some purchased at the farmer's market in Ostuni, three kilometres away. “We like our food and don't count the cost, but if we did, the weekly bill for the two of us would probably be in the region of \$120,” says Leonie. “We drink the Puglian Primitivo, which is now being recognized as one of Italy's finest wines. Its price all over the world is rocketing, but here in Puglia we can still drink the best without breaking the bank. Depending on what we buy, a litre of wine will cost between \$2 and \$4.”

For 14 years the couple conducted tours from a convent that they had converted into a guest house in the hills near Lucca, Tuscany. They spent half of each year in Italy and half in England, where David was teaching art at a college. (Leonie had just retired from teaching art.) While the hills of Tuscany are beautiful, the practicalities of their location were less so. “Our place was at the top of a hill, and we had to park the car at the bottom, and carry everything up,” says David. Leonie and David started looking for other options and finally they went south to Puglia because of the nicer weather, proximity to the sea and



In search of romance and history? Then Ireland's Atlantic coast will capture your heart.

the low cost. Within a week, they bought a run-down *masseria* (traditional Puglia farmhouse) for \$243,500 envisioning an artists' retreat.

With a budget of only \$32,500 and the occasional help of friends and family, they accomplished the rebuild and renovation in less than a year. And in 2004, they opened as a B&B (*Ilcollegio.com*) and as a venue for special art weeks which they teach.

"The business evolved and grew from our own interests, into food tours, wine tours, and art tours. We pick what we like and create the next thing," said Leonie. "Most importantly," adds David, "We run our business, our business does not run us."

"When time allows, we love to wander around the local countryside, either on foot or by bike. We live on the coastal plain that is given over mainly to olive oil production. This means flat countryside, endless olive groves and a varied coastline—perfect for a leisurely bike ride or stroll along the beach. The coast is still mainly unspoiled by tourism," says David.

The area is dotted with ancient *masserie*, fortified olive farms and mills that have provided a livelihood for country people for centuries. Many are now abandoned or have been turned into luxury hotels. Many are being bought by discerning foreigners who turn them into stunningly beautiful homes. For someone contemplating the move to Italy, Leonie and David advise, "Rent a place for a year, learn the language, and see the whole cycle of the year. If you choose to buy, have any work done through your own connections not through the agents."—*Chris Wildgen*

"The area is dotted with ancient fortified olive farms."

"Just Seeing those Rolling Hills Made me Yearn"

Name: Kim O'Shea

Age: 38

Living in: County Clare, Ireland

It's the Irish people and countryside that fill Kim O'Shea with pleasure. "I love the green, lush landscape, the rolling hills, the seasonality and the pace of life. And I really like the calm temperament and humour of the Irish people."

Kim's love affair with Ireland started back in 1997, when she graduated from university and celebrated with a friend by backpacking for two weeks in Ireland and France. "Wherever buses or trains went, we were there! We travelled to Dublin, Galway, Cork and then on to France," recalls Kim.

On that trip she was struck by the beauty of the Irish landscape. "I felt an immediate pulling, a yearning, what the Irish call *grá* for the land, just seeing those rolling hills and the patchwork of fields. Somehow, I knew I had to come back." By early 1998, she was working at Tír na Nog, an Irish pub back home. "I'd already fallen in love with the country and got the job to immerse myself in Irish culture." She made friends with an Irish waitress and they returned to Ireland in April, Kim this time renting a car. No longer bound by train and bus routes, they drove all over. "We drove

2,735 kilometres on that trip, and still it wasn't enough."

In October, Kim returned and racked up another 2,575 kilometres criss-crossing the island. "I was already thinking about moving," she says. And when she met Fergal O'Shea, a local man, life took a sudden and romantic turn that turned her thoughts of moving into a reality. By January 1999, Kim had moved to Shannon, County Clare, and in November the couple married.

Kim reflected on what to do next. "Fergal was working at a local plant and I was considering my options: enrol in a graduate program in Irish Studies? Open a café in Shannon? Instead, we bought a house in Shannon and I worked odd jobs—painting, cleaning offices, anything." She also enrolled in a degree program in Irish History and Irish Archaeology. Kim eventually left her studies to join some of her fellow students and work fulltime as an archaeologist. The couple settled near the scenic village of Cooraclare, in an old house. "It's on a pre-1840 map and possibly dates from the 1770s. It originally had 100 acres, but we've only got 1.66 acres. We were lucky because this house was never derelict, like many old houses were. It was always lived in and still has the original parlour, bedroom and loft."

The couple are thrilled with the everyday discoveries around their home. "Just digging in the garden we unearth pottery shards and old metal objects." Even more intriguing is hearing stories from the locals about their house. "Neighbours tell us about coming here as kids and dancing in the kitchen. When the floor was laid, they put objects under the flagstones, like copper pots and a Belfast sink, so that when you danced on them they would create different sounds. "It's only 10 kilometres to Doughmore Beach at Doonbeg, where collecting golf balls that have strayed off the adjacent links course at The Lodge at Doonbeg is a favorite pastime." And Kim is just a 45-minute drive from Shannon International Airport.

Kim's future projects are rooted in the history and traditions of her new rural home, with plans to write about the archaeology of Ireland and there may also be another house or two that calls out to have its unique features saved and preserved.—*Gary Hetzler* ■

Play Europe's Tourist Visa Loophole

By Glynna Prentice

Do you dream of spending time in the Old World? If you're not ready for a full-time commitment to Europe, but would like to give its medieval market towns and historic cities a try, then I have a hop-in/hop-out solution. Maybe you don't want to give up ties in Australia and prefer to live abroad only part-time. Some people don't want to take on the tax burden that can come with residence in some European countries like France and Spain. Still others just don't want to fill out the paperwork. But part-time living in Europe, on a simple tourist visa, is pretty much obligation-free for Australians. The only trick: You can't overstay your welcome.

So like many Australians who spend part of the year in Europe, I've learned to count how many days I can legally stay, and I plan out my trips like a battle marshal. First, the rules for stays in Europe...

The United Kingdom allows Australians to enter without a visa and stay for up to six months. But the UK is the exception. Most of mainland Europe is part of the Schengen Zone: a group of countries that have signed an agreement to operate as a single unit for tourist visas, among other things. Within the Schengen Zone, there are no internal "border crossings." Your passport is stamped when you enter the Zone and when you leave; the rest of the time you usually can move freely from one Schengen Zone country to the other.

The down side to this convenience: If you're not from a member state—and Australian citizens aren't—you can only stay in the Schengen Zone for 90 days out of every 180. (Note: 90 days is not the same as three months.) You can spend your 90 days in the Zone in a single block or a few days at a time, entering and leaving the Zone. Likewise, you can spend those 90 days in a single country, or you can travel around the Zone. Either way, you're limited to 90 days. The 180-day clock starts when you first enter the Zone, and it's a rolling limit. That is, by the time you hit Day 91 of your time in Schengen-Zone Europe, at least 180 days must have passed since you first entered.

If you want to stay longer than 90 days at a stretch, you need to get a residence visa for one of the Schengen-Zone countries. Once you do, you can stay legally in that country for the length of your residence visa...and your 90-day tourist limit applies to all the other Schengen-Zone



Enjoying Europe part-time can be easier than you might think.

countries. You can always return to Australia when your 90 days in the Schengen Zone are up.

But what about those who dream of spending a year or more vagabonding around Europe? What if you want to rent your house back home for the year, for instance, and use the rent to fund your European adventure? It's possible to stay within the rules and do this, too—at least for a year or so. It just requires country hopping. Here's the secret...

Not all of mainland Europe is part of the Schengen Zone. And while there's a lot of overlap between the Schengen Zone and the European Union, they are not the same. Some countries belong to both; some belong to one or the other. So stay in the Schengen Zone for 90 days—and then stay in a country outside the Zone for the subsequent 90 days. You can then return to the Schengen Zone for your second 90-day stint.

For instance, one summer I based myself in Spain, with side trips to other Schengen-Zone countries. But I flew to Europe via London, outside the Schengen Zone. And at the end of my 90 days in the Zone, I tacked on a stay in the UK. On an earlier trip, I spent time outside the Schengen Zone in the middle of my trip. Since I was breaking up my 90-day stint, I made sure that Immigration stamped my

visa whenever I left and re-entered the Zone, so that I could prove the number of days I'd stayed.

The UK isn't your only option for stays outside the Schengen Zone. Ireland is outside the Zone, too. Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Cyprus are all working to join the Zone...but for now they're still outside it. So are Turkey and Morocco (as well as the rest of North Africa). You may prefer some of these destinations over others. But they do give you a range of options for cost of living and climate.

Don't care for the UK's chilly winters? Consider the beach in Croatia, instead. Want a city vibe with a touch of the exotic? Stay in Istanbul, or even Marrakech. Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Norway, on the other hand, aren't in the EU but are part of the Schengen Zone; they are not options for your 90 days away. One down side to short three-month stays is that you're limited to holiday rentals, which tend to cost more—often substantially more—than long-term rentals. But in exchange you get flexibility: You can go where you want. In low season, you may even get price breaks on rental rates or be able to find house-sitting gigs. ■

It's possible to stay in Europe for at least a year or so."

A Stress-Free Visa for Your New Life in Tropical, Modern Malaysia

By Kim Haworth

Dreaming about moving overseas is easy. But applying for visas and managing finances can be the least romantic part of your relocation. Thankfully, some visa application processes are simple and easily understood. Some countries welcome foreigners—especially retirees—with open arms. One such country is Malaysia, renowned for its modern cities and tropical beaches as well as its first-class healthcare system.

The Malaysian Government has a visa programme that actually encourages foreign residents, in particular retirees, to live permanently in Malaysia. The “Malaysia–My Second Home” (MM2H) programme allows foreigners who fulfil certain criteria to stay in Malaysia as long as possible on a ‘multiple-entry social visit pass.’ The pass is valid for an initial ten years and can be easily renewed upon expiry. Compare that to some countries that require you to go on a ‘visa run’ to renew every six months of so, and the MM2H comes across as visa nirvana.

The MM2H programme also offers numerous other financial incentives. For instance, holders of the MM2H visa can purchase as many properties as they wish. Many countries, especially in Southeast Asia, do not allow foreigners to purchase property freehold. Or if they do it is only in partnership with a local resident. But Malaysia is one of only two countries (the other being Hong Kong) where foreigners can buy real estate. But the good news about Malaysia is that expats don’t feel compelled to buy because renting is excellent value. However if you do decide to buy property, as a holder of the MM2H visa, bank financing is easily available, with loan approvals ranging from 60% to 80%. And you’ll only pay the same low interest rates as Malaysians (20-year housing rates are currently 4.55%).

You can import your offshore income and personal belongings tax free, which means you can avoid being taxed in both Australia and your new home. And if you’re over 50 you can seek part time (20 hours per week) employment in some critical sectors.

Financial Requirements

The financial requirement is proving that you can support yourself while living in Malaysia. If you’re under 50 you will be required to show proof of liquid assets worth a minimum of RM500,000 (or \$175,832) and an offshore income of RM10,000 (about \$3,520) per month. If you’re 50 or over, you need to show financial proof of RM350,000 (\$123,082) in liquid assets and an offshore income of RM10,000 (about \$3,520) per month. You must also provide your bank statements for the last three months, with each month’s credit balance showing at least RM 350,000 (\$123,082).

If you’re retired, you need to show proof that you receive a government pension of RM 10,000 (about \$3,520) per month. In some cases, a combination of personal income and a government pension will be accepted.

Generally, the older you are, the easier and cheaper it is to join the programme. Once your visa is approved, you can choose to either: open a fixed deposit account of RM150,000 or show proof of receiving a government pension of RM10,000 per month. After one year, if you have chosen to make the fixed deposit, you can draw down half of the deposit to buy a property, go back to school, or for medical purposes.

You must maintain a minimum balance of RM100,000 from the second year

onwards and throughout your stay in Malaysia under this programme. It is clear that the Malaysian Government is trying to attract foreign residents with a relatively high net worth. If you are unsure whether you can reach the financial requirements of the programme, get in touch with a certified agent to discuss your options. Participants who have purchased property/properties bought for \$343,500 (RM1 mill +) and above in Malaysia, can state that they have done so, or state their intention to do so in their submission letter and their basic fixed deposit will be lowered or waived.

As well as meeting the financial requirements for the visa, you also need to provide some medical information to the Malaysian Government. You (and your dependents if you wish to include them in your visa) need to provide a medical report from any private hospital or registered clinic in Malaysia. You must have valid medical insurance coverage that is applicable in Malaysia from any insurance company. If you face difficulty in obtaining medical insurance due to age or an existing medical condition, you may be eligible for an exemption.

Help is Available

The Malaysian Ministry of Tourism and Immigration provides official licensing to a number of private agencies that can help you apply for the MM2H programme. Most will assist you with each step of the journey, from answering your initial questions, to handling your application, and aiding your relocation and your attendance at appointments. Three websites that have a wealth of information for prospective residents are *Migratemalaysia.com*, *Myexpatmm2h.com*, and *12retireinmalaysia.com*.

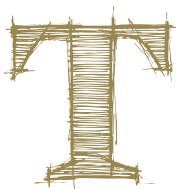
Of course, a lot more goes into deciding on your new retirement destination than the ease of the visa application process. And you can expect that with any bureaucratic process, you’re going to need to devote time and patience. But if you’re considering a southeast Asian destination, this programme should be enough to get Malaysia onto your shortlist. See: *Mm2h.gov.my*. ■



Malaysia welcomes retirees with open arms with their MM2H visa.

A Small-Town Vibe in the Heart of Southern Brazil: Meet Serra Gaúcha

By John Clites



his valley has ancient rolling hills that are blanketed in a mix of pines and broadleaves. Then the bus I'm on passes a clutch of palm trees. The Serra Gaúcha region, in southern Brazil, is practically unknown abroad, but it's very popular with Brazilians. They flock here to enjoy the temperate, highland climate, so different from much of mostly-tropical Brazil. (Serra, in fact, means "highlands.") They come for the year-round cultural events, the many ecotourism activities, and for the region's delicious food and wine—the country's budding wine industry is based here, and most of the food on your dinner plate is grown within a few kilometres of your table. There's excellent shopping, too. All of which accounts for the region's tourist appeal. But it's a great choice for full- and part-time living, as well.

The clean little towns have trim, attractive town squares and flowers in every yard. There's an air of prosperity here, with new construction everywhere and cars that are newer and larger than elsewhere in Brazil. Locals are well-dressed and well-educated, and it seems like everyone has a new smartphone. You'll find plenty of English spoken, and locals who like to practice speaking it with you. The towns in this region are so pleasant, liveable, and familiar that, if the signs were in English, you could think you were in a



small town in a western country. In fact, it's a place where, if you learned just a little bit of Portuguese, an expat could feel very much at home.

The People and Places of the Serra Gaúcha

The Serra Gaúcha lies in the northeast part of Brazil's southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul, which borders Argentina and Uruguay. It's far enough south (29 degrees) and high enough (about 850 metres) to have four true seasons. Each winter the thermometer drops to freezing a few days. There is light snow some years. The Serra Gaúcha has three regions: the eastern Gaúcha region, which is largely farmland and villages; the central,

EATING WELL IN THE SERRA GAÚCHA

You'll eat well in the Serra Gaúcha, though many dishes are heavy. Pastas, sausages, pork, potato dishes, and rich desserts are on most menus, and rotisserie chicken and mountain trout are also local favourites. Local microbreweries produce tasty dark beers—a rarity in pilsner-loving Brazil. This region produces a staggering variety of fruits and vegetables, as well. Overall, Gramado is more expensive than Canela, but in both cities you can enjoy excellent meals at reasonable prices. Here are a few examples:

Galeto Italia, in Gramado, offers an outstanding evening *rodizio*. Choice of soup, salad bar, four pastas, followed by the never-ending *rodizio* parade of meats, sausages, and poultry. Excellent quality, excellent service. The tab? About \$25, with soft drink, tax, and tip.

Bar dos Alemão is a local favourite in Canela, where the all-you-can-eat lunch buffet with soft drink is less than \$10. An exceptional value. Try the *sagú* dessert.

Confeitaria Martha in Canela offers great desserts and snacks. I loved the cherry cheesecake, about \$3.



Gramado's German heritage is obvious when you walk its scenic streets, which are easily explored by foot.

It winds its way through town until it intersects with Avenida das Hortensias, Gramado's other major thoroughfare. This intersection marks the edge of downtown and is where many major celebrations take place. And Gramado has plenty of them. A drawback to many small towns is that you quickly run through the limited activities available. But Gramado enjoys events throughout the year. There are religious festivals around Easter. The region celebrates its heritage in the Origins of Gramado festivities in the first half of May. Themed festivals mark the wintertime, in June and July, which is the busiest tourist season. Brazilians from tropical climates flock to Gramado, dressed in layer upon layer of summer shirts, and hoping they will be lucky enough to see a dusting of snow on the sidewalks.

Gramado is pleasant even when there are no festivals. Although it's in the highlands, the town is fairly level and easily explored on foot. While it does get warm here, summertime highs rarely exceed 32 degrees, and temperatures plummet after sunset. I found the cool nights in the Serra a welcome break from Rio's heat and humidity. Begin your tour of Gramado by strolling the downtown area straddling Borges de Madeiros. If your feet get tired, stop at the Rua Coberta pedestrian plaza for a leisurely lunch and a locally produced beer at one of the many restaurants. If you'd like to enjoy a bit of nature, visit Lago Preto (Black Lake), which is located within the city limits. You can browse kiosks, bike, walk, picnic, or rent a paddleboat. Afterwards, cool off with some ice cream or another beer.

Gramado is prosperous and has a solid infrastructure. Roads and parks are well maintained. The city sparkles. There are numerous banks (including an HSBC), and you can find anything you need in the shops here. Health care needn't be a concern. The local hospital has 80 beds, and there are 15 government clinics in the municipality. All medical specialties are represented here. Brazil has a public health-care system, which is free to residents. Foreign visitors and part-time residents may also use the public services for emergencies and for routine services. Private insurance plans are also available. If paying cash, an office visit with a private practitioner may cost \$80.

Gramado, though centred on tourism, is a very liveable town. Life here would appeal especially to those who enjoy the arts and fine dining. Gramado, however, is not for those retiring on a shoestring budget. Also, bear in mind that Gramado received almost 2.5 million tourists last year. At times you'll be sharing your city with droves of other admirers.

Canela: Great Food and the Great Outdoors

Named for a local tree, Canela is similar in size to Gramado (39,000 inhabitants). Canela is not as glamorous as Gramado, but the town certainly has its own charms. For many, Canela would be the more desirable place to live. Real estate costs are, on average, about 20% less in Canela (see box page 19). Tourism is not as pervasive as in Gramado, and Canela has more of a family feel. And while there is upscale dining, you can also find excellent all-you-can-eat lunch buffets in the \$8-to-\$12 range.

German-influenced region; and the Italian region in the west, which—no surprise—is home of the state's wine industry. Vineyards and wineries cluster around the town of Bento Gonçalves.

I spent most of my time in the German region, home to the popular towns of Gramado and Canela. These towns, around five kilometres apart, form the heart of the Serra Gaúcha. If visiting, you'll probably want to stay in either Gramado or Canela. If you'd like to spend a few days just relaxing, dining, and sipping wine, you may want to opt instead for Bento Gonçalves.

Gramado: Cultural Hub with a German Touch

Gramado is often described as "chic." Its economy today is based almost exclusively on tourism. But this town of 35,000 somehow manages to be unabashedly touristy without descending into kitsch. Rather, it's quite classy and upscale. When you arrive, you pass through a German-style, ceremonial town gate, which welcomes you in several languages. The German heritage is also apparent in the architecture. Heavy beams and carved wooden eaves adorn the fronts of many businesses and homes. Flowerbeds are everywhere, continually reminding you why this area earned the nickname of the *Região das Hortensias*: the Hydrangea Region. The town is quite green and, most noticeably, organised and tidy.

Gramado has two principal thoroughfares. The first, Avenida Borges de Medeiros, is actually highway RS 115 from Porto Alegre.

"People flock here for the temperate climate, cultural events, and excellent food and wine."

EXPLORATION

Canela's principal landmark is the church of Our Lady of Lourdes, also known as the Catedral de Pedra (Stone Cathedral). Walking along Felisberto Soares street with the cathedral at your back, you'll encounter a number of pleasant eateries. A favourite spot among locals is Empório, less than one block from the cathedral. There, on my Friday evening in town, I met several locals, including the owner of Empório and her husband, who chatted with me in English. English is much more widely spoken in this region than in any other part of Brazil I've visited. A local told me that anyone who can afford to goes abroad to an English-speaking country for a time.

On an evening out at the popular microbrewery Farol, my host Vinicius confided to me, "In Rio Grande do Sul, we don't like samba. We like rock!" (The band that night played three sets, two of them in English.) At Farol I also enjoyed a truly memorable dinner of duck *à l'orange*. Chased with the house brew, it was perhaps the best meal in a week of fine meals (and, at around \$20, good value, too).

Canela offers an impressive variety of dishes, with German and Italian predominating. It's an excellent town for foodies. But what really draws tourists here is Canela's outdoor pursuits. There truly is something for everyone: hiking, fishing, bird watching, horseback riding, nature photography, abseiling, rafting, rock climbing, and something they call *arborismo* (walking cables between trees, shooting zip lines, and the like). At Alpino Park, for instance, you can ride a small roller coaster through the trees or go four-wheeling.

You can begin your explorations only a five-minute drive from downtown Canela in Parque Caracol (Snail Park). Despite its unflattering name, the park is beautiful. Its centrepiece is the Catarata Caracol waterfall, whose waters spill from the top of the gorge to plummet 130 metres to the river below. Within the park, you can hike several trails, go up an observation elevator, or ride in a gondola, suspended by a cable high above the forest. If you enjoy nature photography, you'll have a field day here.

Canela has its own festivals, as well, most notably a music festival held here each August in the majestic old Laje de Pedra Hotel. Singers, musicians, composers, and producers come together for a weeklong celebration of Brazilian music. Like Gramado, Canela is well-kept and public services are good. There is a lovely town square on Rua Felisberto Soares where mothers take their toddlers.

GETTING THERE AND AWAY

To reach the Serra Gaúcha, fly to Salgado Filho Airport in Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul. There are several direct flights there daily from Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Buenos Aires. From Porto Alegre it is two hours on good roads to Gramado, and only a few minutes more to Canela.

An executive-class bus stops at the airport. A one-way ticket costs only \$15. Once in Gramado or Canela, virtually everything is a short walk or taxi ride away. If you'd like to make a side trip, several agencies rent cars.



Grab a bench and enjoy your Italian sorbet. Locals believe that Canela's health care system lags behind Gramado's. There are only four clinics, but the 64-bed hospital offers virtually all specialties. Also, under Brazil's public health care system, you can visit any public facility. So if you feel the service is better in a neighbouring town and choose to drive there, that's your right. Which leads to a related point: If you are considering living in this area, you really don't have to choose between Gramado and Canela. They are only a stone's-throw apart, and in many ways complementary in what they offer. Live in one, and you can have both.

Vineyards and Wineries

Other towns in the area, notably the wine centre of Bento Gonçalves, are also popular. Bento Gonçalves lies about 105 kilometres west of Gramado. Taking your time and allowing for a couple of stops, the trip may take two hours. Head out of Gramado on Highway 235. After about 32 kilometres you'll come to Nova Petrópolis (population 20,000), where the German heritage is very apparent. You may even hear some German spoken. I found it to be pleasant and (of course) spotless. Folks in Canela speak highly of Nova Petrópolis as a place to live. The town square is dominated by a maze of hedges. Real estate prices here almost certainly would be less than either Gramado or Canela. If you are looking for a quiet spot to hang your hat, Nova Petrópolis is worth a look.

West of Nova Petrópolis, you'll soon enter the Italian region, passing through a series of small towns, including one named Feliz ("Happy"). At Bom Princípio, head north on Highway 122. Enjoy the mountain scenery. Stop for a chilled watermelon juice at a produce stand, and marvel at the variety of fruits and vegetables, all grown locally. Soon you'll arrive at Carlos Barbosa, where each June locals celebrate a wine and cheese festival. A fee of about \$30 allows you to eat and drink your fill. Continuing on to Garibaldi, a restored steam locomotive, the Maria Fumaca, carries passengers to Bento Gonçalves in latter-day elegance.

Bento Gonçalves is an attractive, hilly town with well-tended public parks and a bustling business district. It's a pleasant place to

"Canela is a great town for foodies."



Surrounded by verdant rainforest,
Canela is a nature-lover's paradise.

a half bottle costs \$8.30. After lunch you can take a tour of the cellar, seeing how wines are made—and, of course, sampling several, for about \$13.50 per person. If sipping wine isn't enough for you, visit the nearby Spa do Vinho, where you can actually bathe in it. I chose simply to take photographs. Due east of Bento Gonçalves is Caxias do Sul, the region's largest city, with about half a million people. It's not very attractive, but it does have a large airport, several hospitals, and shopping.

On Balance...

There's a lot to like in the Serra Gaúcha: the food, the people, the orderliness, the lack of crime, the range of cultural and outdoor activities, and the weather. Gramado and Canela in particular offer something that most small towns can't: variety in real estate, food, and activities. These are enjoyable, interesting, liveable towns. While there are cheaper places, you can live here reasonably. Real estate is affordable: You can find two-bedroom apartments for sale for under \$184,000 and for rent in the \$650- to \$750-a-month range (see box below). You can get good meals for very reasonable prices. Good quality healthcare is available free, and private insurance is much less than you'd pay in many Western countries. Many activities are also available for free.

The drawbacks? The nearest beaches are two hours away, and they aren't great. But if you have a few days to kill, some of Brazil's most spectacular beaches lie five to six hours away in neighbouring Santa Catarina state. For some, the weather will be a negative. There are four distinct seasons here, not year-round tropical weather. But cool nights bring sound sleep. Of all the areas I've seen in Brazil, the Serra Gaúcha is an area where you can truly feel at home. ■

stop for coffee or to stretch your legs. But most visitors head directly for the Vale dos Vinhedos ("Valley of Vineyards") just outside town. Here, gently sloping hillsides sport row after row of grapes. Family names like Valduga, Miolo, and Salton are proudly displayed on roadside plaques. The earthy, almost pungent smell of grapes permeates the air, strongest just before harvesting in February.

You should lunch at Casa de Valduga. The dining room is of polished granite—but feel free to enter in shorts and sneakers, like all the other guests. While a duo plays guitar and piano in the background, the waiters will commence the endless parade of food known here as *rodizio*: breads, soup, garden salad, pasta salad, pork, cockerel, various pastas, fish. The Valduga chardonnay is quite good;

REAL ESTATE—WHAT'S ON OFFER

Development in both Gramado and Canela is brisk. Many properties are bought as second homes by residents of Porto Alegre and São Paulo. Foreigners have yet to discover the Serra Gaúcha in any significant numbers. You'll find a variety of options. There are single-family homes on generous lots in gated communities, and many apartment units to choose from in town. In Canela, an apartment currently on the market has two bedrooms (one en-suite) and two bathrooms, with a covered balcony with built-in barbeque grill. Asking price: \$165,300.

Also in Canela, another two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment sold recently for \$170,500. This is a spacious unit, with a nice view behind. It also has an enclosed patio with barbeque area (standard here).

In Gramado, two-bedroom (one en-suite), two-bathroom apartments of about 70 square metres are on offer from \$232,600 to \$284,000. Add another \$12,250 to fit them out. Also within easy walking distance of downtown Gramado, two- and three-bedroom apartments are available starting at about \$281,600.

These units are fully fitted out and have panoramic views.

Few rental properties are available. In Canela, a furnished one-bedroom, including taxes and body corporate fees, may cost less than \$610 a month; a two-bedroom will rent for around \$735. (Buying an apartment here for part-time personal use and rental by the day during high seasons could be a very attractive investment.)

For additional information about these or other real estate offerings, contact Paulo Rogerio Boeira or his son Vinicius at Faro Realty in Canela. They both speak passable English. Vinicius is a member of the National Association of Realtors (# 61228786). Website: Faroimoveis.com.br.

Keep in mind that Brazilians expect to bargain. Asking prices are therefore often inflated by 10% to 20%. Throughout Brazil, the buyer is often expected to fit out new construction to his or her taste, so plan on another \$10,000 to \$15,000 to install tile floors, light fixtures, and appliances. Ongoing costs in this area are low. Monthly body corporate fees average less than \$125 per month. Construction here, as in most of Brazil, is brick, mortar, and plaster, not timber frame.

A Champagne Lifestyle on a Beer Budget in Exhilarating Mumbai

By Rakhee Ghelani

Bounded by water on a peninsula, and dripping in colour and exotic flavours, life in Mumbai is exhilarating. As India's economic boom continues, the financial capital of the country continues to expand, evolve and reinvent itself. Mumbai is the wealthiest city in India. It is a unique blend of the "new" affluent India and the "Old Raj" heritage. Every corner of the city holds a different adventure, from national parks with leopards, to a myriad of restaurants and bars to some of the world's most impressive colonial architecture. It's no surprise that many expats come to Mumbai for a short stint, and end up staying for years.

You'll find a unique blend of cultures in Mumbai—people from other Indian states including Gujaratis, Marwaris and Sindhis, and those who migrated from further afield such as the Parsis, also known as Persians. It is also a religious melting pot, with Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Zoroastrians and Jains all leaving their mark on the landscape and cuisine of the city.

With a population almost the size of Australia, the city is so large and diverse that there are many different areas to live in, each with their own attractions.

One of the most popular expat spots is the north-west suburb of Bandra West. It's chock-full of bars, restaurants, designer stores, and plenty of Bollywood star-sightings. Located on the seaside, it's reminiscent of St Kilda in Melbourne, where you can power-walk with Mumbai's middle class along the promenades. Two people can dine on some of the freshest seafood, and the best Fish Thali in town, at Highway Gomantak for under \$8. For ₹60,000 (\$1,180) per month, you can rent an 89-square metre two-bed residential apartment in Bandra West. See: [99acres.com](#).

Farther north, is the up-and-coming suburb of Andheri West, making it a more economical choice, yet still with the glamorous beachside lifestyle and all the best new bars. A cappuccino here at a trendy café will cost you just \$1.70. An inexpensive meal out here can be as little as \$4 with an Indian beer to quench your thirst for \$2. In Andheri West, for ₹40,000 (\$790) per month, you can rent a furnished 111-square-metre, two-bed independent villa with three balconies and a drawing room, finished with wood work and marble flooring, and close to the market. See: [99acres.com](#). If you prefer high-rise living, you can rent a comfortable three-bedroom apartment in Andheri West for as little as \$1,200 per month.

Many expats also like the open green spaces of Powai. Overlooking a lake, this newly developed suburb is popular with families and those who want to escape north for the weekends. It's



Mumbai is large and diverse and there are many different areas to live in, including affordable expat enclaves.

an ideal choice if you don't need to travel into town every day, and can just relax and enjoy the restaurants, large shopping centres and space. For ₹45,000 (\$885) per month, you can rent a furnished two-bed 110-square-metre apartment in Powai. An apartment like this includes security personnel, parking, spacious gardens, a kids' play area and modern amenities like swimming pool, squash and gym. See: [99acres.com](#).

Southern Mumbai is the heritage region, with wide, open streets, stunning colonial buildings and plenty of family money that gives it an elitist air. As you move south prices increase, two-bed properties in South Mumbai start from about \$2,750 per month. Skyscraper apartments that rival New York in style and price with water on both sides of the peninsula can cost the earth, especially those properties facing the sea. In the latest blockbuster real estate news, an apartment on Mount Pleasant Road, South Mumbai, with uninterrupted views of the Arabian Sea sold for nearly \$12 million.

While foreigners can buy real estate in Mumbai, renting makes the most sense. You can rent a comfortable three-bedroom apartment in Powai or Andheri West for as little as \$1,200, yet the same apartment could cost more than \$600,000 to purchase. As you move south prices increase, with a similar property in South Mumbai starting from about \$2,750, or a cool \$1.25m to purchase outright. Many high-rise complexes have additional benefits, like a swimming pool, gym or children's playground.

Navigating the rental market in India is much easier with a broker. For a fee of one month's rent, a good broker not only takes the pain out of finding a suitable home, but also helps navigate the

"Every corner of the city holds a different adventure."

reams of documentation and archaic registration requirements. This can free you up to enjoy immersion into your new, if temporary life.

Rental prices are further offset by the cost of living, which can be incredibly cheap. A couple can live well here for \$2,000 a month. A couple can buy all their weekly groceries (including meat and toiletries) for less than \$75. Budget more for imported items, like cheese, Tim Tams and wine. The cost of bills, mobile phones and connectivity is also relatively cheap, and can be covered for about \$100 a month for two.

While many of the large apartment complexes have their own general store and facilities attached, one of the best things about living in Mumbai is that no matter where you live, you're not far from anything you need. Each suburb is like a micro-city, with small shops and street vendors selling everything from shampoo to yoghurt. Men pushing carts wander the streets with the latest produce, from juicy strawberries to roasted yams. The sights and smells of the local street markets are an adventure all on their own. If you don't want to leave home, you can just have it delivered for no extra cost; even Vegemite can be home delivered here!

Mumbai is a food lover's paradise. You could eat a different type of cuisine every day in Mumbai, and never get through everything on offer. A delectable and satisfying meal can be had at a clean, local restaurant for as little as \$7 for two, or at a five-star restaurant for well over \$200. There is something to suit every palate, from Italian to Mexican, and of course the best variety of Indian cuisine in the country. Try the fragrant mustard curries of West Bengal or a fiery crab curry from Kerala. There are also some local variations, like fusion Indian Chinese, that is now so ubiquitous it's a cuisine all of its own. And of course, everyone home delivers if you can't



be bothered cooking. Unofficially considered one of the best restaurants in Mumbai, the Shree Thaker Bhojanalay restaurant in Marine Lines serves vegetarian cuisine for just \$7 to \$10 a go, which is a small price for its epic reputation.

Pubs, clubs and karaoke (both western hits and Bollywood specials) can be found all over town. Have a martini overlooking the Arabian Sea from a rooftop bar, or grab a cheap beer at the local watering hole. The rising middle class has taken to entertainment in a big way, with stand-up comedians, live open-air music events and arts festivals always popping up around the city. Thanks to the balmy weather, many events are held outdoors, with only monsoon season (from June to September) keeping people indoors. Of course it's also mandatory to take in a Bollywood movie occasionally.

Traffic is one of the biggest complaints from expats and locals alike, which is why choosing the right place to live is so important. Many choose to have a car and driver for convenience and comfort. The Tata Nano, the cheapest car in the world, can be purchased outright for \$3,900, and having a full-time driver at your beck and call is possible for as little as \$195 per month. On the flipside, it's possible to access world-class medical care in Mumbai at one of the private hospital at a fraction of the cost at home. Private health insurance can also be purchased from as low as \$19 a month.

Mumbai is well serviced by its spanking brand-new international airport. Cricket fans, or anyone homesick can travel from India to Australia on any major South-East Asian commercial airline. One of the big advantages of living in India is the relatively cheaper airfares. Flights to destinations as far-flung as New York are relatively inexpensive. If you wish to explore closer to home, there are plenty of budget domestic airlines, like Indigo and Jet, offering flights around the country from as little as \$40.

Mumbai really is the destination of choice for those seeking a champagne city lifestyle on a beer budget. With all the comforts of home, but the excitement and tradition of an ancient civilisation, this city really does have it all. ■

Editor's note: Rakhee Ghelani is an Australian travel writer and business owner who abandoned a successful corporate career in Australia to move to Mumbai.

UNRAVELLING THE MYSTERIES OF VISAS FOR INDIA

Visa requirements for living and retiring in India are not clear-cut, but there are some options that can be explored. While there isn't a specific visa for retirees or permanent residence, the options include:

- Tourist visas are issued for six months at a time. Once this visa is expired, you can leave India for a month and then apply for a new six-month visa. If you would like to switch to a multiple-entry visa, you need to take this up with the High Commission/Consulate Generals directly, after the issuance of the visa. See: Vfsglobal.com/india/Australia.
- The rather oddly named "X visa" allows someone to stay in the country for 180 days, but has the advantage of being able to be renewed in-country. The circumstances where an X visa will be approved is a little bit murky, but it's generally granted to people who can demonstrate a genuine need to be in India for more than six months.

- If you take up a course in India, you can get a student visa for five years.
- Business visas allow stays of up to 180 days. If you set up a business you will be eligible for this. Employment Visas are available only to those who are sponsored and employed by a company in India. They will allow you to stay in India only for as long as you remain employed.
- Australians of Indian origin, meaning that your grandparent, parent, or you, were once a citizen of India, can apply for Overseas Citizen of India status ("OCI"). This gives you the right to live in India for as long as you like and even purchase property. As Australia allows dual citizenship, there's no barrier to being granted OCI status.
- If you're married to a person of Indian descent, you may qualify for Person of Indian Origin status ("PIO"). This entitles you to stay in India for 15 years and can be extended if required.



With its beautiful beaches and laid-back lifestyle, Caye Caulker is a favourite destination for expats.

Affordable Caribbean Belize: A Land of Leisure and Opportunity

By Jason Holland

I've never seen such blue water as the Caribbean in Belize. I couldn't keep my eyes off it, whether I was cruising around by boat, watching tiny islets fade into the distance... swinging in a hammock strung between two palms on the beach... or beating that tropical heat with a cold Belikin beer in the shade of a palm frond-roofed beach bar.

Belize has a lot to offer those seeking a new life abroad. The low cost of living means a couple can live well on \$2,500 to \$3,700 or less a month. Established expat communities make for a ready supply of new friends, and it's English-speaking, even

if it's the second or even third language for many locals. (I spoke only English during my time there and had no issues.) And it's no problem to get around. The country is about one-third the size of Tassie: The main highways are in good shape, regional airlines provide service all over, and frequent and on-time water taxis serve the island communities. But under the surface, you find even more reasons to make Belize your home.

Sure, it's somewhat rough around the edges. This country of just 330,000 is still coming into its own. But you can get comforts from home in the local stores.

Even more essential are the improvements to infrastructure over the last few years, including enhanced electric and water utilities. The Internet is high-speed and reliable. And everywhere I went there seemed to be construction or road work. Locals were quick to point out new parks, marinas, or other municipal projects that had recently been completed. There's a feeling of opportunity and possibility, of a place being shaped right now... a country where retirees can find a comfortable place or someone with an idea can start a business. It's not as established as some of the other tourist destinations in the

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Living in Belize for as Little as \$1,850 a Month

In general, you can live comfortably in Belize for much less than you'd spend back home. But the cost of living depends a lot on your lifestyle and location. Imported foods and other products can be pricey. Shop and eat like a local—with a focus on fresh, natural foods from the market—and you'll cut your costs big time.

Ambergris Caye is the priciest place in the country to live. Most restaurants cost as much as back home, for example. And store items are significantly marked up because everything must be brought in by boat and it's a popular tourism destination. Expect monthly expenses closer to \$3,700 here, including housing.

Corozal is one of the more popular spots for retirees on a budget, because it's cheaper to live. Many expats there report living well on around \$1,850 a month. A two-bedroom rental apartment in Corozal, for example, can cost you as little as \$500, and you'll spend about \$250 a month on groceries. In Ambergris Caye, you'll pay more than double that for housing and perhaps even more on food, depending on your tastes.

The Cayo District and Placencia fall somewhere between these two extremes, with the Cayo more on the affordable side of the spectrum and Placencia at the higher end.

region, so there's still lots of room for new businesses that fill a gap in the market. Add in the genuine, helpful, and friendly local people—from a myriad of backgrounds and cultures and a huge variety of landscapes and lifestyles—from beach-bar hopping on Caribbean beaches to off-the-grid jungle living—and you have an ideal destination.

The Islands: Ambergris Caye and Caye Caulker

The most established of the expat communities in Belize is Ambergris Caye. Foreigners have been coming to Ambergris for decades, both for the world-class scuba diving at the Mesoamerican Reef just offshore, and for the laid-back, island lifestyle. Restaurants and beach bars overlook the Caribbean. Docks snake out from the shore at regular intervals, some with eateries and bars at the end. Although it's experienced tremendous growth in the last 10 years, you can still let it all hang out on Ambergris and watch live music with toes in the sand and a cold Belikin beer in hand. Or you can go upscale, too, with French wine, gourmet dining, and luxury accommodation.

The main settlement, San Pedro, is a bustling town. Plenty of foreigners—tourists and expats—stroll the streets or cruise by on bikes or in golf carts. But there are plenty of locals, too, so it definitely feels like a “real” place, not a sanitised enclave. And you're never far from the water. The island vibe is very much alive. Expat Linda Miller has been in Ambergris for seven years. “As a kid I got used to being at the beach or the pool,” she says. “I thought I would like to live like that someday.” After first visiting Belize in March 2007, Linda was so smitten with the tropical paradise that she moved that November. Not ready to retire, Linda has kept herself busy. She

owned the landmark Coco Locos Beach Bar for many years before selling it. She then got involved in property management and recently started working in real estate.

“There always seems to be something going on,” says Linda. “I visit with friends, we go out to dinner—the food here is great.” And even in Ambergris, where prices are higher because everything has to come over by barge, Linda has found ways to cut costs. “I follow the local people around, go where they go, and buy local products,” she explains. “It's cheaper for me to live here than back home.”

Much of the growth and development on Ambergris is taking place to the north and south of San Pedro, catering to those seeking a bit more peace and quiet. South you find homes, lots, and apartments. North has the same options, although

“Watch live music with toes in the sand and a cold beer in hand.”

most fulltime residents stay within a couple of kilometres north of the Boca del Río bridge. Beyond that, you have mostly resorts and tourists, and you have to travel to and fro by boat, although the recent paving of the road north of the bridge may change that soon.

Beachfront, one-bedroom apartments are available from \$217,000, with two-bedrooms coming in at \$248,000. Homes are a bit pricier. A three-bedroom property within walking distance of the beach will set you back \$620,000 or more. Right on the beach, and you're looking at closer to \$1.24 million. You can rent, too. A two-bedroom, furnished apartment north of

the bridge is \$1,240 a month. More here: Remaxsouthwind.com.

Caye Caulker, the smaller island just south, is “Ambergris 30 years ago,” many locals tell me. Less development (no crowds except at the favourite hangout the Split, where shallow water and a bumping beach bar draw dozens). The motto, “Go Slow,” is on hand-painted signs hung on palm trees, admonishing hasty golf-cart drivers but also bestowed by locals on visitors who haven't yet embraced the rhythm of the island. The population of just 1,300 includes a small but stalwart group of expats among its number: retirees and business owners.

There is nothing better than enjoying a lobster (\$12) grilled up by local fisherman while sitting in the shade of a palm tree. But it's the type of place where the feeling of being “on holiday” all the time may make some stir crazy. For many expats around Belize, Caulker is a favourite destination... but they take it in small doses. Just a half-hour from Ambergris by water taxi, it's an easy day trip for lunch and hanging out on the beach. Still, its popularity with holidaymakers means there is an active real estate market. A home with a sea view just outside the main part of town is \$246,255. (Check out: Cayedreamsrealestate.com.) There has also been a recent focus on building homes north of the Split, a narrow channel that separates the two halves of the island. Homes there are only accessible by boat.

Placencia: The Caye You Can Drive To

In the far southern region of Belize you find Placencia, a 27-kilometre narrow peninsula. Since the paving of the road down its length four years ago, it has had a reputation as the caye you can drive to. It definitely has the feel of the cayes. And

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these days, thanks to growing interest and better access, Placencia is booming. Resorts, holiday rentals, homes, and apartments line the coast. And there is a lot of new development, much of it driven by the retirement market as well as by part-time residents and the holiday-home crowd. A planned cruise-ship terminal on nearby Harvest Caye is expected to bring even more people for day trips and tours.

Placencia does have several distinct areas. Placencia Village, at the far southern tip, is the main commercial hub, with shops, restaurants, police and fire station, and other services. Cafés, restaurants, and little art galleries can be found in charming wood-panelled and brightly painted buildings. Palm trees—and generous verandahs—provide shade from the beating tropical sun. The unusual tropical cocktails (ginger mojitos, anyone?) and inventive recipes at Rumfish y Vino make it a popular spot for gourmet dining. Many expats gather at the more informal Barefoot Bar for happy hour. Those who want a walkable community with a beautiful beach a stone's-throw away live in the Village.

Lining the sand here are several bars, restaurants, hotels, and homes—all connected by a footpath. Unlike in Ambergris, the beach here is much more suitable for bathing, as there is less sea grass and fewer boat docks. The popularity of Placencia is reflected in real estate prices. But there are still deals to be had. A three-bedroom home in the Village, a quick walk to the amenities and the beach, is listed at \$246,250.

North of the Village you have more residential areas, although they do have a limited number of eateries and the like. The community of Maya Beach is about midway along the peninsula, where it widens out and there is a lot of available land. This area remains very affordable. Lots inland in the forest or on the lagoon can be had for as low as \$37,150 if you get a deal. With a simple, wooden two-bedroom home in the Village or Maya Beach, you'd pay about \$49,500 for construction. Concrete homes will run about \$1,200 to \$1,600 per square metre in costs.

Many of the other northern communities feature luxury apartment buildings and large homes on the beach. Two-bedroom apartments on the beach start at \$371,240. A two-bedroom home across the street from the beach will set you back as little as \$246,255. See: *Belizeproperty.com*. Beachfront lots up and down the peninsula start at \$216,550. If you're interested in Placencia real estate, the team at Boris Mannsfeld & Associates (*Realestateplacencia.com*) has a lot of experience in the area.

A waterfront lot—with its own boat slip—in one of the new marina projects coming online will cost you \$247,500. As Placencia is a major boating and fishing destination, this could be a great home base if you like to get out on the water often. Dawn Walton, 46, and her husband Dick have been in Placencia since 2011. The couple had been considering retirement overseas for some time, reading about Belize and other countries in the pages of *International Living*. But when Dawn had a health scare in 2009, their timetable speeded up. "It really changed a lot of things for us. It changed our perspective. We didn't want to keep killing ourselves with our business," says Dawn of her husband's work as a master plumber. "Just three months after I got out of the hospital, we went to Belize. We spent some time in Corozal first."

They also checked out Ambergris. But neither spot was what they were looking for. "It was like the three bears. Placencia was

just right. Kind of touristy but not too much. Kind of a busy town centre but not too much. Seven months after we first visited Placencia, we moved here," says Dawn. Dawn spends a lot of time on the beach, volunteers with the Humane Society, hangs out with friends at happy hour, and she's taken up writing fiction, cookbooks, and blogs. "I'm getting used to not going 24/7," she says. "My biggest focus has been my health: learning how to exercise by swimming, walking, and cycling."

Cayo District: Mountains, Jungle, and Rolling Farmland

The bounty of the Cayo District is on display every Saturday morning at the farmers' market in the regional hub of San Ignacio. They get started early: 5 a.m. Among the fresh-from-the-farm bananas, mangoes, avocados, papayas, lettuce, tomatoes, onions, and other produce piled high, I came across a young bearded Mennonite, simply attired in dark pants, plain blue shirt, suspenders, and broad-brimmed hat, in front of a small table. Before him was a scale and bags of just-made goat cheese—for \$10 a kilo. With fresh bread from the French Bakery and fresh fruit, I was all set for breakfast. It was a great introduction to the Cayo

District, which is well known for its thick jungle and vast farmlands, as well as for the rolling hills and low-slung peaks of the Maya Mountains.

Expats in search of a little piece of land to call their own—for an income-producing or hobby farm—come here, as do those who enjoy the mountains more than the beach. It's a great place to fly under the radar and get off the grid. A five-bedroom home, with a guesthouse, set on five acres in Bullet Tree Village, is available for \$308,120. For \$209,100 you could have 25 acres of land, ready for a farm or just your home, with 300 metres of frontage on the Mopan River. On the rental side, there is a two-bedroom cottage in San Ignacio, with mountain and rain-forest views, for \$620 a

"Expats in search of land of their own come here."

Where to Meet Expats and Make Your Own Contacts

If you're considering relocating to Belize, it's a great idea to speak with expats on the ground in communities you're interested in. You'll get the lowdown on the benefits of living there, tips for making the transition easier, and who-knows-what sorts of deals on a beachfront lot or cheap rental. Check out these expat watering holes for local contacts:

- In the northern beach town of Corozal: Jamrock. Lunchtime is when you'll catch many expats here.
- Right on the beach at the tip of the Placencia peninsula: Barefoot Bar. Be there at happy hour.
- On the main drag and on the water on Caye Caulker: Barrier Reef Sports Bar & Grill. The place to watch the game.
- Out in the countryside in the village of Bullet Tree Falls, Cayo District: Remo's Roadhouse. Down-to-earth and friendly.
- In the heart of San Pedro Town on Ambergris Caye: Wine de Vine. Happy hour and special wine tastings.

month. Go to: Rainforestrealty.com.

San Ignacio and its “twin city,” Santa Elena, are separated by the Macal River. Rural villages like Bullet Tree Falls and Barton Creek are places where expats are gathering, too. San Ignacio has the feel of a mountain town, with narrow, winding—and sometimes steep—streets. It has an attractive, recently revitalised downtown square lined with small restaurants. Try Fuego for a modern take on Belizean cuisine. Festivals take place here, along with live music. It’s next to the pedestrian walkway of Burns Avenue, a gathering spot for tourists but also a favourite with expats, thanks to some great restaurants and nightlife.

Just down the road is a large Mennonite community called Spanish Lookout, with its farmhouses and barns. The residents descend from settlers who came to Belize in the 1950s. Most expats in the Cayo—and in the rest of the country, for that matter—head here at some point to patronise Mennonite furniture makers or construction companies, the best in the country. The community also has some of the best food, home goods, auto parts, and hardware stores in Belize.

For Caroline Barnes, 62, Belize was a refuge after she lost everything in the crash of 2008. “I wanted to get away from it all. My sister said, ‘Go to Belize, it’s British.’ I checked it out online, and it seemed like they were encouraging people to move here.” Caroline has been in San Ignacio, the main town of the Cayo and jumping-off point for tours of surrounding natural areas and Mayan ruins, for three years. As a yoga teacher, massage therapist, and English tutor, she makes enough to afford a \$500-a-month, three-bedroom apartment and a comfortable life. “I felt at home from the very beginning. It has a very nice atmosphere and is very multicultural, especially here in San Ignacio,” says Caroline, who enjoys the mountain atmosphere and small-town feel of the place, as well as the active expat community.

Corozal: A Low-Cost Haven

Set on the far northern border of the country, Corozal is far from out-of-the-way and forgotten. In fact, it’s a haven for retirees looking for an affordable place to live, a friendly expat community, the convenience of being on the mainland, the laid-back Caribbean life. And, unlike some other parts of Belize, it’s virtually free of tourists. Unique in the country, Corozal is just down the road from Mexico, making trips to First-World comforts easy. “You get a low cost of living and a Caribbean feel. And if you want a taste of home, you can head across the border to Chetumal,” says Dave Stone.

The Mexican city of 150,000 features shopping malls, hypermarkets, and movie theatres. It’s a great place to shop for items you can’t get in Belize, and—with no hefty import duties—is a cheaper place to shop for many standard items, as well. Many expats head there for medical and dental care, too. After serving in



Afghanistan in the Army and Air Force, respectively, Dave Stone and his wife Crystal, both 31, were looking for a quiet place to settle down that would fit their budget. (Both are currently on a disability pension from service-related injuries.) After narrowing down their list of 40 to 50 countries to Central America, they settled on Belize, and Corozal in particular.

The Stones bought a house in a local neighbourhood around Christmas 2012. They started renovating the inside into a comfortable, western-style home and building a combination garage, workshop, and guesthouse. New tiles, new paint, new cabinets, new doors, and a totally changed interior layout; they and a crew of local guys did the work. The cost was about \$75,000. “It was a way to stay sane while we waited for our residency,” says Dave, referring to the requirement to stay within Belize for a year to qualify for permanent residence. Their neighbours were a bit confused to see foreigners in their midst at first, says Crystal. But now not a week goes by without the lady next door bringing over some local delicacy. And the local expat community has also been supportive.

“They have a lot of experience living here, and we’ve gotten a lot of good advice,” says Crystal.

Though the Stones live in town, many expats live in a group of communities—essentially expat enclaves—several kilometres out. These include Consejo Shores and Mayan Seaside, as well as the Four Mile Lagoon, which is on the road to Mexico. More developments are coming down the pike. A big part of Corozal’s affordability has to do with the bargain real estate. Lots with quick beach access can still be had for just over \$12,400, with those on the water for \$62,000 and up. A two-bedroom waterfront apartment on the Lagoon is available for \$155,000, while a typical home in Consejo Shores, two bedrooms with a view of the Bay of Chetumal, costs \$278,500. More at: Mlsinbelize.com.

Something for Everyone

While there are clinics, hospitals, and doctors throughout Belize, the facilities and care offered are basic. Most expats head to two private hospitals in Belize City for treatment and to visit specialists. Belize Medical Associates (BelizeMedical.com) or Belize Health Care Partners (BelizeHealthcare.com) offer high-quality care, including major surgery, at extremely good prices. Whether you prefer the life of quiet beachside leisure, an active social life and plenty of places to go out at night, the tranquillity of pasture and jungle, or a low-cost beach destination, there’s something for you in Belize. And because it’s such a small country, you can visit all the other spots quite easily.

While you’ll find your place in the sun for a calm retirement in Belize, if you’re seeking a place to reinvent yourself, with a business or perhaps farm, you’ll have plenty of opportunity. This plucky little country offers a lot to expats, and it’s getting better all the time. ■

Now is the Time to Grab a Real Estate Bargain on Ireland's Beara Peninsula

By Ronan McMahon

The decade leading up to 2006 saw Ireland suffer through one of the biggest real estate bubbles on earth. The real estate market stalled in 2006/2007, and then in 2008 the crisis hit. In 2009, the global financial crisis rolled through, flattening Ireland's entire banking sector and economy. By 2011 Irish real estate was available at a discount of 80% on peak prices. Today, Ireland's real estate market is bouncing back. News stories are filled with talk of housing shortages and fast-rising values. These reports are correct. There has been a strong surge in demand for family homes in desirable areas of Ireland's main cities. The big buying opportunity here has passed, but right now Irish real estate is a tale of two markets.

The buying moment for a little cottage in Ireland's Southwest is now. These areas are struggling to retain populations in traditional activities of fishing and small-farm holdings. Locals frequently opt to build a new house rather than renovate a traditional farmhouse or cottage. Where you see charm, they see old. The Irish love affair with real estate is on a break right now. There is almost no demand from the Irish themselves to buy a holiday home here. They are happy to rent. In the meantime, many want or need to sell homes that they borrowed to buy during the boom.

Some buyers from Europe and the UK are returning, but this is mostly at

the super-high end of the market. This area has long been a favourite of low-key industrialists, entertainers, and financiers. In the corner of a little local pub, it's not strange to see a sheep farmer, a fisherman, an English investment banker turned cheese-maker, and a Swiss industrialist, all sharing the "craic" (or fun) over a pint.

Peninsulas jut out into the wild Atlantic along Ireland's southwest coast, ending in dramatic points. Giant waves crash on the

base of cliffs and roll along sandy beaches. Mountain ranges shelter picture-perfect, soft, calm bays. Warm air races up from the Gulf of Mexico. Subtropical plants flourish.

You can buy a typical Irish farm for \$110,495."



On the beautiful Beara Peninsula in Ireland's southwest, cottages can now be bought for a bargain.

Frosts are rare and short-lived. It is a part of Ireland that attracts tourists regularly, and there may never be a better time to buy a home on this part of Ireland's Atlantic coast. These peninsulas have an island feel. Small towns are close-knit and welcoming. At night pubs fill with visitors and locals. There's great eating, drinking, and music. Tourists come to hike, fish, and take their chances that the sun will shine on the wild beaches. This is a stretch of coast I am familiar with. I grew up close to Cork city and along West Cork's coast, and I spent my childhood holidays in county Kerry. I have made many trips to this stunning coastline every year since. That's why I'm surprised that even I, a local, have overlooked one stretch of coast, and one peninsula in particular.

The Beara Peninsula is the largest



and most remote on this coast. This is an area that first got my attention a year ago. It's had it since. Today, we can buy a little home here for a song—a buy of a generation for this kind of property. This was the traditional seat of power of the powerful O'Sullivan Beare clan. Native Irish aristocrats, they were one of the last holdouts after the Battle of Kinsale, in 1601, saw most Irish aristocrats flee to continental Europe. It was the O'Sullivan Beare connection that first turned me onto this peninsula. Last summer, I got a call to ask if I was interested in one of Ireland's finest castles for two cents on the euro. So I jumped in my car from Cork city, and one hour and 20 minutes later I was enjoying a big plate of mussels straight from the bay in Bantry. From there I continued on to Castletownbere, a further 50 minutes along the peninsula. The drive is stunning, with awesome views along winding roads.

Castletownbere is a major fishing port—one of the biggest in Ireland. Large-scale fishing has brought prosperity to some. And put many smaller guys out of business. There are some tourists here, but not many. It has much more of a traditional local feel than the rest of West Cork or the Ring of Kerry. Close to Castletownbere is Dunboy Castle. Over the centuries there have been several fine castles and houses on this spot...or within a stone's throw. The original castle was owned by the O'Sullivan Beare clan. The British came and burned it down in 1602, before building a new mansion. Then in 1920, in the Irish War of Independence, the Irish burned that one down. It sat idle until a local fisherman and businessman borrowed a rumoured €50-plus million (\$79 million) and set about renovating it into a super-luxury hotel.

The Ring of Beara is the closest thing the area has to a tourist trail. Its 148 kilometres takes you around the peninsula. The starting point is Kenmare, crossing the Healy Pass, and finishing in Glengarriff, famed for its subtropical gardens. En route you pass through Adrigole, Castletownbere, Allihies, and you can turn off to take in Dursey Island, Eyeries, and Ardgroom. It's picture-perfect Southwest Ireland, but hidden even from locals' gaze. It's just been missed—caught between the tourism and holiday-home areas of the Ring of Kerry and the more popular areas of West Cork. Traditional homes

New Deals on Luxury Homes in Adare Manor, Limerick

In the summer, I became aware of an opportunity to buy homes in the grounds of the luxurious Adare Manor, in County Limerick. Whispers on the ground are that one of the homes in the courtyard by the clubhouse sold very recently. I hear the amount is €150,000 (\$237,000). It's one of the bigger homes (four bedrooms and approximately 158 square metres) and on a corner that backs onto the driving range. I still have a target price range of €120,000 to €130,000 (\$189,500 to \$205,400) for the two-bedroom homes. "The Villas" are the bigger, newer, and higher-end homes to the left of the seventh hole. These sold for about €1 million (\$1.6 million) nine years ago. Three are in the hands of receivers—effectively in foreclosure. One is listed for sale. The asking price is €400,000 (\$632,000). I'm told offers of €210,000 (\$331,735) and €230,000

(\$363,400) have recently been refused. I get the impression €250,000 (\$395,000) might buy it—the receiver has the final decision.

These are fine houses. Annual management fees are €3,000 (\$4,740), which is a lot for here. There's an option to rent through the hotel, but this arrangement is in flux right now, as the resort is for sale. There's a lot of interest in buying the Adare Manor resort. High-profile local and international names are being bandied about. Adare Manor and the golf course are in great shape. And it's hoped a new owner will make a significant further investment. Most homes are listed on websites: *Myhome.ie* and *Daft.ie*. You'll find listings for this area under County Cork, Beara, and Kerry, Ardgroom, and Tuosist.

in coastal Ireland are going cheap. Silly cheap. There are no buyers lining up for traditional farmhouses and cottages, even if they sit on a lot of a few acres with ocean views. That's despite the huge benefits in Ireland of buying an existing structure on an ocean-view plot. You won't get planning permission (permits) to build on an oceanfront or ocean-view plot unless there is an existing structure.

Close to Ardgroom, a typical Irish farm cottage lists for €85,000 (\$134,250). I expect it could be bought for €70,000 (\$110,495). You are a short stroll from the ocean and have great views of the headland beyond from the upper floor. The ground floor has been updated. The second story is, in real estate agent-speak, a blank canvas. For a total spend of \$31,000, you could create a charming, picture-perfect little Irish farm cottage on its own ocean-view plot. You'll need to put some of your time and imagination into it. This isn't something I suggest buying for a quick and easy flip or strong rental. (The rental season is short and unreliable here.) This is a buy if

you want to own a traditional farmhouse in beautiful, coastal Ireland, off the beaten track but with unrivalled scenery. You are buying at rock-bottom prices. If a cottage like this comes back into fashion, you could be sitting on quite the little investment. Only buy if you are happy to own, regardless of whether it's in fashion or not. But if this is something you want to own, the buying moment is now. ■

Editor's Note: Ronan McMahon is the Executive Director of Pathfinder, *International Living's* preferred real estate advertiser. A native of Ireland's Southwest, he now travels the world—visiting more than 15 countries each year—to uncover the best real estate investment opportunities, seeing around 200 potential deals for every one he recommends. To stay up-to-date on the latest deals on Ireland's Atlantic coast—and other real estate opportunities in Europe's recovering economies—follow Ronan's *Real Estate Trend Alert* service. See: *Intliving.com/RETA*.

Burma's Oil and Gas Market is Set to Take Off

By Jeff D. Opdyke

A war looms in Asia, though you won't have heard of it. This will be a war fought for resources and strategic positioning in the global economy of tomorrow: a war for economic dominance in what is emerging as the most crucial region of the world. The challenge for investors comes in knowing where to go to profit from this new war in Asia. And I know where. Burma...a country less than four years removed from a military junta that ruled, often violently, since 1962.

The aging military leaders have finally released their death-grip on power and now businesses from pretty much every major country you can think of—Australia, Japan, China, Canada, Singapore, Korea, India, Great Britain, Thailand—are beginning to swarm to opportunities that exist everywhere. Burma has the potential to become one of the richest, most important nations in Southeast Asia. The country is awash in under-exploited resources: timber, zinc, copper, tungsten, coal, and limestone. It's home to a rich vein of precious stones, including ruby and jade. It's swimming in abundant oil and gas deposits, with unofficial reserves exceeding 3.2 billion barrels of oil and almost 2.5 trillion cubic metres of natural gas reserves.

And with access to vast amounts of water and more than 30 million acres of arable land (just larger than Tasmania), Burma holds great promise as a breadbasket nation. Burma occupies a convenient location on the eastern shores of the Indian Ocean, smack-dab between India and China. Many developed countries want a strategic relationship to keep closer tabs on what will soon be the world's two largest economies. And at a time in history when real assets are the true measure of wealth, such developed countries want to ensure that they have access to Burma's resources.

Untapped Reserves

The oil and gas market in Burma could represent a valuable yet timely opportunity in an economy that has, until recently, been suppressed by tight government scrutiny.

For the better part of six decades, Burma's bounty lay locked behind a wall of secrecy. But now the way is clear for exploration, production, and oilfield-services companies from around the globe to claim their piece of the oil and gas market in Burma. Seventeen oil-rich basins dot Burma's onshore and offshore geography. Of those, most are either lightly explored or completely unexplored. Many of the country's gas fields are essentially plugged, because of inadequate infrastructure to get the stuff to market.

Burma's energy industry is one giant opportunity—especially since the country's immediate neighbours, India and China, are both desperate to access these new energy sources. China is already

tapping into the country's reserves. It is spending \$3.22 billion building pipelines across Burma to China's Yunnan Province. The pipelines will give oil-and-gas production

companies in Burma a direct link to one of the world's thirstiest energy consumers. India is now eager to put its own taps into the country's reserves. As an investor in emerging and frontier markets for the last 20 years, I have searched for exactly the kind of opportunity that Burma's energy industry represents. But I know that some are nervous about putting their cash to work in a country where democracy is still finding a foothold.

That's the dichotomy of Burma today: Invest early and take the risks, as your money doubles or triples in value...or rises 10- or even 100-fold. Or wait, and lose out on one of the last opportunities to invest in nascent capitalism. Perhaps the most telling proof of Burma's renaissance was

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's December 2011 visit to begin rebuilding ties. That visit ultimately led the U.S. to restore full diplomatic ties with Burma in January 2012. Then, in April of that year, the U.S. eased sanctions on Burma that had been in place for more than two decades.

In Beijing, over 11,000 kilometres from Washington, that event raised eyebrows. China has a very keen interest in Burma's vast resources. But China is worried that the U.S.'s newfound cosiness with Burma is aimed at undermining its economic interests. As a Chinese vice minister in April questioned aloud, "Why [did] the United States choose not to engage Burma in the past few decades, but now chooses to?" The answer is obvious: location.

The Best Seat Between Two Giants

The people of Burma do not particularly like China. They see China as a reminder of the cruel junta, which China supported. China faces a government in Burma that is increasingly cool to its northern neighbour. It risks losing influence in winning bids to exploit Burma's resources—bids that the junta once all but handed to China. I suspect that within the decade, China will find themselves in an undeclared war for control of resources and influence inside Burma.

The fight will emerge most visibly in the oil patch. And here's where Australia enters. More than a dozen foreign oil companies—from Australia, the U.S., Great Britain, China, Canada, Indonesia, India, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, and Russia—have begun searching for new reserves in Burma. ■

Editor's Note: Jeff D. Opdyke is *The Sovereign Society's* investment director. As a lifelong world traveller, Jeff has been investing directly in international markets since 1995, making him one of the true pioneers of foreign trading. For more, see: TheSovereignsociety.com.

Invest early and your money could double or triple in value."



Estonia Could Be Your Digital Offshore Haven

By Bob Bauman JD

In October 2014, the tiny Baltic country of Estonia invited people worldwide to register as “e-residents,” opening its digital borders and moving toward a world in which a person’s identity online matters just as much as their identity offline. The eastern European country invited anyone, anywhere, to open a bank account or start a business there. This means that now, anyone with an Internet connection can live their financial life based in Estonia, without being physically present—which is great for business and investment. But what do we really know about this tiny country?

Now that it has emerged as a technology power-house with excellent digital infrastructure, it’s time to take a look...

The 1.3 million citizens of Estonia share a 300-kilometre border with bellicose Vladimir Putin’s Russian Federation. After World War I, in 1920, Estonia first achieved independence. But after World War II Estonia fell behind the Iron Curtain until Soviet Communism collapsed in 1989. This tragic history makes it all the more remarkable that today democratic Estonia is one of Europe’s leading freemarket economies. It offers numerous offshore financial and investment possibilities, including this unique online e-residence status for foreign individuals and businesses.

As a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Estonia is guaranteed military defence by the U.S. and other NATO members in the case of an attack. It is also a member of the European

Union, the Eurozone, and the free-travel Schengen Area. It ranks well in the UN Human Development Index (33 out of 187 countries), with high ratings for economic freedom, civil liberties, education, and press freedom. Indeed, Estonia, while not a “tax haven” in the traditional sense, has pioneered innovative tax and financial policies. In 1994, Estonia became the first country in Europe to introduce a so-called “flat tax,” replacing three tax rates on personal income, and another on corporate profits, with one uniform rate of 26%.

The Economist observed: “At the stroke of a pen, this tiny Baltic nation transformed itself from backwater to bellwether, emulated by its neighbours, including Russia.”

Estonia, as a member of the World Trade Organisation and the European Union, transitioned effectively to a modern market economy with strong ties to the West. These ties included becoming, in 2011, the 17th member of the euro currency zone. It is the first former Soviet-controlled state to adopt the

euro. Importantly, Estonia offers foreign businesses a base within the European Union single market. Taavi Kotka, the Estonian government’s chief information officer, says it is aiming to have 10 million non-Estonian e-residents signed up by 2025. More than 4,000 are already on board.

To obtain e-residence in Estonia, you have to make a visit to verify your identity, with your fingerprints and face biometrics taken by border police. But there’s talk of allowing people to sign up at Estonian embassies. The country already has the world’s most advanced Internet voting system; votes were cast online by

Estonians living in 98 different countries in elections this spring. All land records are also online.

Start Your Business

Since 2007, the government of Estonia has offered an online e-business register for company formation. It takes just minutes, at the most two hours. All the information is automatically sent to the courts and the official Central Commercial Register. You get confirmation a few minutes later. More than 98% of incorporations

now use this system. The applicant logs onto the portal using an IDcard, fills in the required information, founder or founders electronically sign the documents, fees and share capital are transferred through the Internet, and the person sends the application with just one click. The registry does require an Estonian e-ID card, easily obtainable online. There are more than 1.1 million active e-ID cards in Estonia, covering nearly 90% of Estonia’s 1.3 million residents.

Open a Bank Account

A bank account in Estonia is a good platform for investing in the Baltic region and even in Russia (if you are brave). Banking secrecy is so strict that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has complained; it seems Estonian banks fail to determine the owners of corporate accounts. Swedbank and SEB Bank are two leading financial institutions recommended. Taxation here is territorial and income earned outside of Estonia is not taxed. (Email Swedbank AS at: info@swedbank.ee, and see SEB Bank AS, at Seb.ee/eng.)

Estonia has transformed itself into one of Europe’s business success stories, using sophisticated e-solutions. Both business-to-business and government-to-business interactions use digital infrastructures to create the fast interaction and access needed to make commerce work. There is an old proverb in this country: “He who starts small will finish big.” As a modern nation, Estonia has proven that wisdom. ■

Estonia has pioneered new tax policies.”



Estonia has opened its digital borders.

Limited-Edition Prints: Start Collecting Fine Art with Just \$1,860

By Alexander Hayter



To most folks, names like Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein conjure up multi-million-dollar price tags that seem well beyond the means of mere mortals. That's true of their paintings, but what about their prints? Original fine-art prints fall into multiple disciplines. Those you'll come across most often include etchings, engravings, lithographs, linocuts, screen prints, and woodcuts. And they all share one thing in common—the artist is directly involved in the creation of the image. And here's the thing: The market for international modern and contemporary prints is one of the most

buoyant, exciting, and affordable areas of fine art collecting.

You can start collecting with just \$1,860... Right now that would get you a lithograph by Cornish abstractionist Terry Frost, a screen print by Pop Art maestro Peter Blake, or a lithograph by the current darling of the contemporary art world, Peter Doig.

Don't confuse prints with posters—that's a common misconception. Basically, all the methods for making prints involve the artist's creating a design onto a matrix. The matrix is the plate of either metal, wood, or stone onto which the image is drawn, carved, or whatever. This matrix is then inked and a limited number of impressions are taken from it.

Most editions are limited to 50 to 100 examples. (The only notable artist who drifts from this fairly controlled amount is Warhol, who generally produced works in editions of 250.) The majority of 20th- and 21st-century artists produced prints: original works that are created

"The market for prints is one of the most affordable areas of fine-art collecting."

in limited edition, and signed and numbered by the artist in question. Artists produce prints for different reasons. Some do so to reach a greater number of collectors who can then affordably buy their work. Others consider the printed medium as important to them as painting. Warhol and

Picasso are two prime examples.

Throughout his entire life, Picasso created prints in strict, limited editions, and saw prints as integral to the working process in creating his paintings. Few realise this, but all of Warhol's works are prints. Those "paintings" you see selling for \$37 million? They are all screen prints on canvas. It's precisely this element of Warhol's practice that appeals so much to investors, as really the only division between his paintings and his prints is the size and the material they are printed on.

The beauty of collecting modern prints is that you can hang your investments on the wall and get pleasure from them as well as financial gain. Since so many artists work in limited-edition prints, you can collect to suit your taste as well as your budget. If you don't like Pop Art or Picasso, but really like British artists like David Hockney, Henry Moore, or Barbara Hepworth, no problem. They all made fabulous limited-edition prints, and the entry points are remarkably low. It's hard not to see value in buying a signed, original Henry Moore for as little as \$600.



Limited-edition prints—such as this Chagall (left) and Warhol (below)—can amass wealth as they hang on your wall.

In terms of investment, the market has evolved enormously. And prices, like for like, have increased dramatically over the past 10 years. The print market tends to follow the market for fine paintings and works by the same artist. The rarest and most important examples by some artists fetch well into six-figure sums. Some extremely rare and important works can surpass the million-dollar price mark. Auction prices for many artists have increased tenfold, and the range of auction houses holding sales now offers good liquidity at all price points. Collectors and investors are now supported by active galleries and auction houses in all major markets, led by the U.S., Europe, and Japan.

Over the past two years we have seen a diversification in the BRIC markets, principally in China, where there has been a dramatic growth in buying blue-chip, 20th-century European artists, primarily Picasso, Matisse, and Miró. The global auction market currently sells around \$430-million worth of fine prints a year.

Four Rules to Follow When Buying...

1. Strictly Limited-Supply Prints

Prints were produced in strictly limited editions by the most famous artists of the 20th century. All artists of note have a catalogue *raisonné* (a list of all their artworks). This includes all their produced prints and gives specifics of edition size, publisher, and, where applicable, variant details. Do your research on the works and ask questions. Make sure you are buying the real thing at the right price.

2. Quality is Key

Take care to buy the best examples of the artists' output in a given medium. Like all works produced in multiples, those in the best condition command the top prices. Make sure you don't buy something that's had a lot of restoration or is in poor condition; the investment potential for works in poor condition is limited.

3. Trusted Price Histories

Price guides for 20th-century prints are well regarded. *Gordon's Print Price Annual* has been produced for decades and is the go-to index for current and

How Much Can a Print Grow in Value?



original fine-art prints can be surprisingly affordable and offer a steady level of growth. The values of well-known, blue-chip art works rarely suffer, even in recession, and these tend to be the most stable in the market.

Examples include:

Artist: Marc Chagall

Title: Daphnis and Chloe

Edition size: 50

Description: Lithograph from Chagall's mature period. One of the most sought-after artists of the mid-20th century. Born in Russia, he lived mainly in France. His dreamlike, colourful images often involve scenes of lovers in Paris.

Sale prices:

1998: £9,000 (\$17,540)

2008: £15,000 (\$29,230)

2013: £25,000 (\$48,720)

Increase: 180% over 15 years.

Annually 7.1% compounded.

Artist: M. C. Escher

Title: Eye

Edition size: 60

Description: Lithograph by Surrealist artist. An eccentric Surrealist, with a highly mathematical way of constructing his images. His works are highly complex and involved.

Sale prices:

2001: £7,000 (\$13,640)

2005: £15,000 (\$29,230)

2013: £22,000 (\$42,870)

Increase: 215% over 12 years.

Annually 10% compounded.

Artist: Henri Matisse

Title: Odalisque

Edition size: 200

Description: One of the most recognised names in 20th-century modern art. His recent exhibition at Tate Modern in London was one of the most visited in the museum's history.

Sale prices:

2004: £10,000 (\$19,500)

2008: £14,000 (\$27,285)

2013: £24,000 (\$46,775)

Increase: 240% over nine years.

Annually 10.2% compounded.

Artist: Andy Warhol

Title: Marilyn

Edition size: 250. Series of 10.

Description: Along with Picasso, the most instantly recognisable and famous artist in the world. The king of Pop Art and, along with Picasso, the most expensive artist ever sold at auction. In November 2014 over \$370 million worth of Warhols were sold in New York in fewer than 30 lots. The value and saleability of Warhol is now one of the barometers that people look to when judging health in the art market.

Sale prices:

Entry level: From around £5,000 (\$9,750)

2000: £15,000 (\$29,230)

2005: £38,000 (\$74,070)

2008: £55,000 (\$107,200)

2013: £115,000 (\$224,155)

Increase: 670% over 13 years.

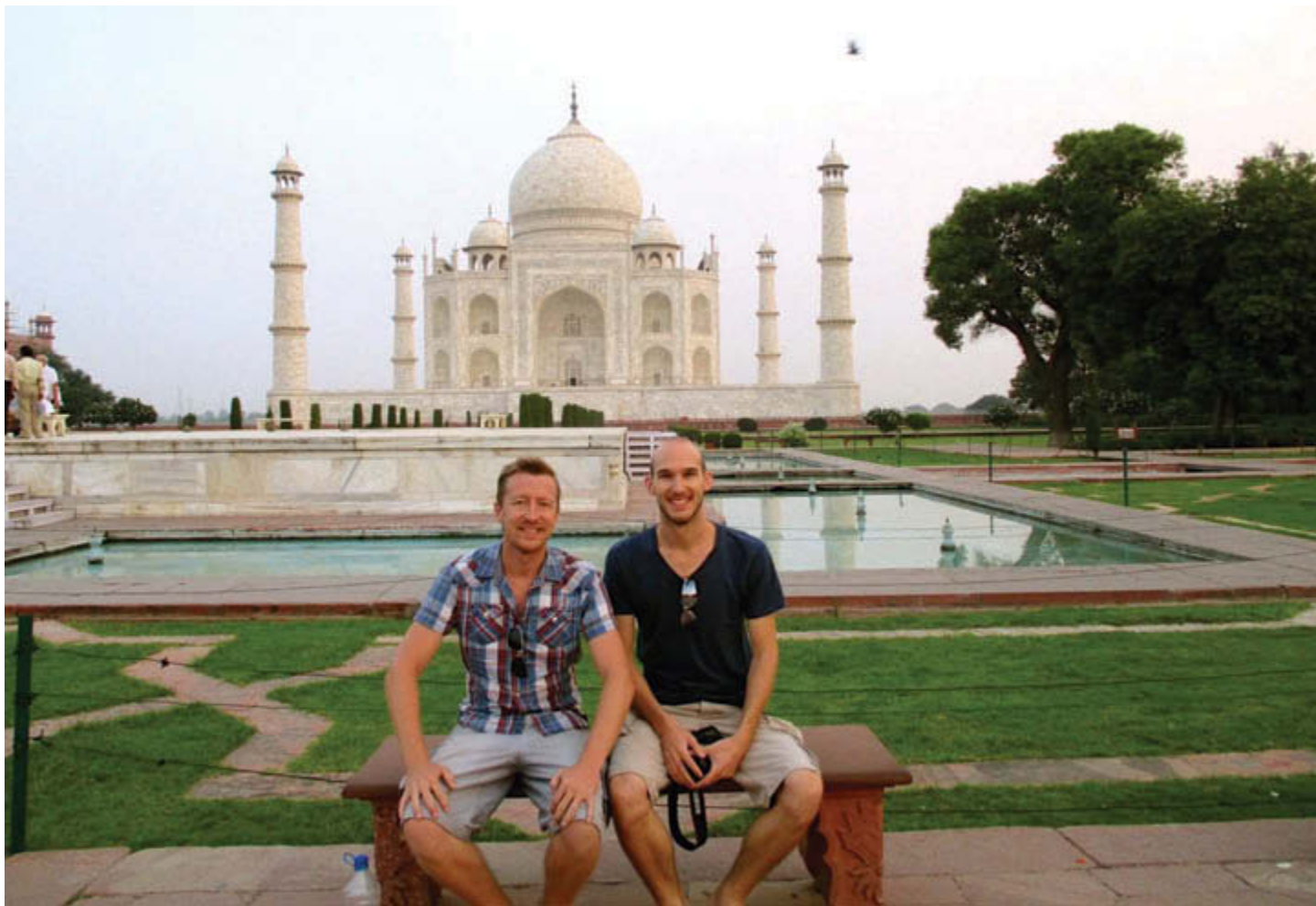
Annually 17% compounded.

historical values. It's useful to refer to this, as it collates the results of all print sales at auction houses globally, enabling you to track the market accurately.

4. Buy Blue Chip

The safest investments are in the most well-known names. Don't follow fashion and buy the latest hot name—nine times out of 10 that artist will be forgotten within a decade. Look to artists who have an established, secondary-market following, even in times of recession. Blue chip names are where the value lies. ■

Editor's Note: Alexander Hayter is Head of Modern and Contemporary Art at Dreweatts & Bloomsbury Auctions, part of the Stanley Gibbons Group (who advertise in *International Living*). He was previously in charge of Modern & Contemporary Prints at Sotheby's London, before joining Dreweatts & Bloomsbury Auctions in 2003. Over the past 10 years, Alexander has overseen the sale of more than 10,000 prints and set auction records for artists such as Lucian Freud, David Hockney, Roy Lichtenstein, Henri Matisse, and Andy Warhol.



Mat Lewis and Stoewie van den Bulk operate their business entirely online, making it possible for them to live anywhere at any time.

Building a Business on the Cheap While Seeing the World

By Koren Helbig

Last March, Mat Lewis and Stoewie van den Bulk left behind their comfortable lives in Melbourne and took off overseas on an open-ended trip.

They've been travelling ever since, mostly around Southeast Asia, but unlike many other Australians who head abroad on the trip of a lifetime, Mat and Stoewie have been working the whole time, too, managing their own fledgling online business.

The pair launched View Retreats, a luxury holiday home booking website, in December 2013. They started travelling just three months later, and say living outside of Australia saves them loads of money, allowing them live “an amazing life at a cost that’s kind to the wallet,” yet keep investing in their business.

“We are spending less each month here—including all of our costs—than we did for rent alone in Melbourne. This allows us to see more of the world while minimising our costs and continuing to

invest in the business,” Mat says.

“Pretty much everything is considerably cheaper in Southeast Asia compared to Australia. We set ourselves a budget of \$2,300 per month for all costs for two people, including accommodation, food, beer, travel, flights and sightseeing, but we’ve spent considerably less each month. Oh, and I got a haircut the other day for \$1.”

The pair have lived in nine countries so far, including Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, India and Holland. They spend

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about a month in each place, bunking down in Airbnb accommodation or guesthouses and working from shared co-working offices, where they can mingle with locals and other expats. “A month gives us enough time to meet people, discover the life of the locals and enjoy the sights of the local area before moving on to the next place,” Mat says.

“Having an online business, one of our only requirements is a reliable Internet connection. This has proved a challenge in many parts of Southeast Asia, which is why we choose to work from co-working spaces now, where the Internet is usually pretty reliable. This costs us about \$100 each for the month, which is much cheaper than any similar offices in Australia.”

Both Mat and Stoewie gained some experience in the travel industry before leaving Australia. Mat worked for several years as general manager for a worldwide adventure tour operator, while running his own coaching and mentoring consultancy.

But the pair, both keen travellers, say the idea for View Retreats actually grew from their own frustration at trying to find unique accommodation to stay in from among the sea of properties available on big booking sites. “We saw the opportunity to offer people a more tailored and high-quality selection of retreats, lodges and luxury holiday homes around Australia and New Zealand. We have some of the most incredible and unique accommodation available in our part of the world, so we’ve just made it easier for our visitors to find,” he says.

They set up and registered View Retreats in Australia and then paid a developer to build their website from scratch. Mat says the first year was “pretty tough” as they channelled their earnings back into the business to grow their range of properties and build a solid base of traffic to the website.

To begin with, they spent about \$2,000 each month on Google Adwords—that’s the little adverts that pop up on Google. That positioned their website at the top of Google’s search results. They also focused heavily on making their website come high in searches, using keywords, and constantly uploading fresh content to help push their site to a higher ranking in search engine results.

Mat and Stoewie say now that “organic” traffic is steadily building, they’ve dropped their Google Adwords spend to \$800 a

month, and have also hired a part-time virtual assistant to get the word out about their business via social media, particularly Twitter, Pinterest and Facebook. They’ve also used websites like Elance and oDesk to connect with freelancers worldwide, which Mat says helps keep costs down as they can contract workers as they need them. “Our copywriter is in Sweden, our designer is in Palestine, our developer is in Vietnam and we’re working with another writer based in the Czech Republic, so it’s a very international operation,” he says.

They pay an accountant in Australia about \$200 to manage their annual tax return (the business is currently earning under the \$75,000 GST threshold), pay about \$40 a month on Xero accounting software to handle invoicing and bookkeeping, and spend about \$200 a month on their virtual assistant. Mat says the business is their main cost these days, as they’ve been able to whittle their living costs right down by staying in cheap countries and throwing everything at developing the business.

“Living outside of Australia saves us loads of money.”

“There’s a lot of pressure in the first year or two of a start-up and it can be incredibly expensive. Travelling in Southeast Asia has really taken the pressure off by reducing our personal expenditure immensely,” Mat says. “In terms of making a great living, we’re not there yet—the business is making money, but not yet enough to support us fully. We found that our significantly reduced lifestyle and business costs meant we could reduce the expectation on our top-line revenue. This released a lot of stress as it meant that the business could grow more naturally without us having to achieve massive revenues, to pay massive costs at home.”

Mat says there are some challenges to working while travelling, and discipline is a must because the distractions of new and exciting places to explore can make it difficult to focus on business objectives. “We originally started out with a very loose schedule, but we now work a pretty strict nine-to-five, Monday-to-Friday business week to keep us on track,” he says.

There’s also the time difference to contend with, as most View Retreats business partners and customers are based in Australia and New Zealand, which sometimes means early morning or late evening calls are unavoidable. Yet Mat says he treasures the freedom to work whenever he wishes, and says he feels liberated from the drudgery of waking up to an alarm clock each morning.

“If it’s been raining for a while and we suddenly get a nice day on a Wednesday, we’ll take the day off and maybe work on the weekend instead. I also love wearing shorts, a singlet and thongs almost every day to work and the fact that each month we have a different view outside our office window,” he says.

Mat guesses he and Stoewie may eventually tire of all the moving around and seek out a more solid base at some point, but says for now they love that each day is unique and totally unpredictable. “It’s not like at home where we all have our daily routines that don’t really change month to month, year to year. The unpredictability keeps things exciting,” he says.

That said, this year they’re planning to pause their travels for a few months and base themselves in Siem Reap, in Cambodia’s north. “We really loved this place, so we want to spend a few months here focusing on the business and building on the growth that we’ve seen this past year,” he says.

Shifting around so often means they don’t really have a chance to master the local language, though they do try to learn a few words and phrases here and there and have noticed that locals appreciate the effort. They also find a gym and a yoga studio in each city to help ground themselves, and spend a lot of time walking their local area, “getting lost and soaking up the culture.”

“We don’t stay in any one spot long enough to really call it home, but each place we stay in becomes our home for a while,” Mat says. For those considering a similar path, Mat advises just jumping in and giving it a try. “So many people have said to us: ‘Oh, we’d love to do what you’re doing.’ But very few people actually do. I think it’s fear that stops most people—but it’s really not that scary. If you work online, then you can work anywhere in the world. And if you choose your destination right, you’ll be able to live well and save a decent amount of money too.” ■

Find Your Motorcycle Nirvana in Chiang Mai, Thailand

By Steve Osburn

If you can start it you can ride it". When my 12-year-old younger self heard those words 50 years ago, little did I know that I would still be addicted to motorcycles to this day. I'm now 62 and have owned many bikes since that life-changing day and have ridden in four different countries. And this fascination with motorbikes still compels me to explore my new home of Chiang Mai in Thailand, 700 kilometres north of Bangkok.

My wife Valerie and I retired in February this year. With a new life in mind, we flew Air Asia from our home on the Gold Coast, via Kuala Lumpur, to Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand. We had come to this decision after realising that we were bored of the same-old-same-old in Australia. Plus, Australia is getting just too expensive for retirees. So, we took the plunge. We sold all of our assets and placed our personal belongings in storage. I am too young to receive a pension, however by living in Chiang Mai, we can afford to live a financially-independent life.

After a lot of research we decided that Chiang Mai was a perfect base for us to live an interesting life and still be able to afford our travel adventures. Apart from bouts of missing our family, especially the new grandson, we absolutely love it here. In Chiang Mai, we found interesting people from all over the world. Every day is an adventure, there is so much to do, there's never a dull moment. We meet people through the local expat community (about 40,000 people) and through many of the various clubs that support nearly every interest.

So it was a perfect place to have a motorcycling adventure. But we needed some local guides to help us find the right route. We met our riding buddies Stuart and his Thai wife Rin through the Australian-based Ulysses Social Motorcycle Club (Ulysses.org.au). Once meeting our new friends, we then planned a three-day ride that was nothing short of motorcycle nirvana. I'm talking about the Mae Hong Son Loop.

The Mae Hong Son Loop is located in the mountain ranges to the west of Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand.



Thousands of locals and tourists flock to a remote mountainside to gaze at the "Sunflower Fields" phenomenon.

The loop takes you very close to the Burmese border and includes the major towns of Mae Sariang, Mae Hong Son and Pai. It is the most-ridden, and the most-famous road chosen by motorcycle junkies in Thailand. The route is 600 kilometres long and consists of 1,864 curves. These curves vary from long sweeping corners, to savage switchbacks, to ear popping climbs and descents. This is all through the most breath-taking pristine mountain jungle scenery you will ever encounter.

You can hire motorbikes to do this ride yourself very easily. I had hired a 650cc Kawasaki Verseys from "Pops" for \$55 per day, including third party insurance. Pop, a really nice elderly Thai gentleman, has rental outlets all over the city and you can hire any bike from a 100cc moped (\$3 per day) up to 1000cc Suzukis, Hondas, Yamahas or Kawasakis for up to \$85 per day (you can email Pop at pop-carrent@hotmail.com).

But before you jump on and ride off into the sunset, check your medical insurance cover. If you hire a bike over 200cc most insurance companies will not cover you for injury. We used Duinsure.com.au which will cover you for personal injury and repatriation back to Australia if needed.

There are many other motorcycle hire businesses in Chiang Mai offering similar deals. If you book a bike a couple of days before your ride you will have no problems

hiring the bike of your choice. A current driver's license will be sufficient for under 200cc bikes but some companies may want a motorcycle license to hire the bigger bikes. Popular hire companies with expats are Tony's Big Bikes (Tonysbigbikes.com) and Mr Mechanic's (Mr-mechanic1994.com).

The hire company will also want to keep your passport but don't leave it. Ask them to photocopy it and you can leave a refundable deposit which can be between \$70 and \$120 depending on the company's requirements.

If you wish to buy a bike the four major Japanese brands have dealer ships in Chiang Mai as well as Triumph, Ducati and Harley Davidson. There is a healthy local second-hand bike market as well with prices similar to Australia, but unless you are going to reside in Thailand the paper work will destroy you and ruin your trip. So I would recommend hiring at least at the start.

Before the ride, Valerie and I arrived at Stuart and Rin's house at 8 a.m. Rin has vast local knowledge and informed us of our route, which was expected to have spectacular scenery. It would take us up to Doi Inthanon National Park (known as the "roof of Thailand") over one of the highest mountain peaks in Thailand through the large town of Mae Chaem and on to Mae Hong Son. All four of us left together early on this trip of a lifetime.

I was gobsmacked by the scenery. Lush rainforest with towering teak trees thrust their heads above the canopy, their leaves just starting to take on their winter orange and yellow hues. The ferns and flowering shrubs desperately clung to near-vertical cliff faces and rocky outcrops. The valleys choked on flowering vines and massive palms straddling babbling brooks and small streams rushing on eager to grow up into big rivers.

As we rode closer to civilisation we encountered tarnished brown fields of corn stalks, their cobs recently harvested. The kernels waited in golden pyramids to be trucked to the mills for processing. Immaculate rows of cabbages, strawberries and tomatoes awaited their journey to market.

After four hours of riding on the most rewarding roads I have ever experienced and having our senses bombarded with spectacular

"The pristine mountain jungle scenery is breathtaking."

scenery, we arrived at the Sunflower Fields for a lunch stop.

The Sunflower Fields phenomenon is the annual flowering of wild sunflowers between October and November. Thousands of locals and tourists flock to this remote mountain side to gaze in awe at this natural wonder.

There were many Thai food stalls along the road side offering a large variety of dishes from Pad Thai at a \$1, to omelettes, chicken and pork dishes cost up to \$5 per serve. Our next stop was a short 30-minute ride to the Japanese War Museum at Khun Yaum.

It was a staging base for 270,000 Japanese soldiers preparing to invade British-held Burma during the Second World War. That plan didn't work out and the base was then used as a hospital for the retreating Japanese army. After viewing this relic from history, it was back on the road again. Just as I was thinking that our riding experience could not get any better, the road from the Japanese War

Museum to Mae Hong Son was pure heaven. It had long sweeping corners, boulevard-wide roads with a billiard table surface, acres of rice fields and towering mountains all around. It was a perfect way to end our first day's ride.

Mae Hong Son is your average large town in Thailand with a small lake at its centre, surrounded by cafes and restaurants and a magnificent Buddhist temple on its banks. There is no need to book

accommodation as there are plenty of choices from backpacker style to three-star hotels ranging in price from \$5 to \$35 per night.

The next day we started our ride to Pai early, riding through the Mae Hong Son valley—an agricultural paradise with acres of rice fields and vegetables of all varieties. It wasn't long before we started the steep climb up the next mountain range and very quickly found ourselves literally in the clouds. It was a surreal experience as we exited above the cloud line to be greeted by the massive teak tree canopies poking their foliage out of the clouds like giant broccoli heads nestled on a bed of cotton wool. As we rode down the other side of the mountain range we encountered massive rocky escarpments covered in rainforest and occasionally scarred by large splashes of oranges and browns where the mountain side had slide into the valley below.

We arrived in Pai at lunch time, checked into our accommodation and headed into town for a meal. Pai is smaller than Mae Hong Son but with similar accommodation options, although in the peak season (December to March, the best riding weather) you can pay up to \$55 per night for a nice guest house by the river.

Pai was popular in the '70s as a hippy retreat and still attracts the young and adventurous types. A beautiful little town, it straddles the Pai River and offers a wide range of adventure activities or just a place for some peace and quiet for the less energetic. The usual walking street markets got a going over and after a nice meal it was off to bed.

Next morning after breakfast and a hot coffee we headed down through the clouds back to Chiang Mai in the valley below. It was a chilly morning but we soon warmed up as we negotiated the 720 corners that would take us back home.

This trip is very doable for people of all ages although a medium level of rider experience and ability would be a requirement. You could even do this ride on a moped. The total cost of our fantastic three-day ride for two people was \$50 for fuel, \$50 for accommodation and \$30 for food. It was the best \$130 I have spent in my life. ■



Watching the bamboo rafts pass by on the Pai River, which meanders through the centre of the town of Pai.



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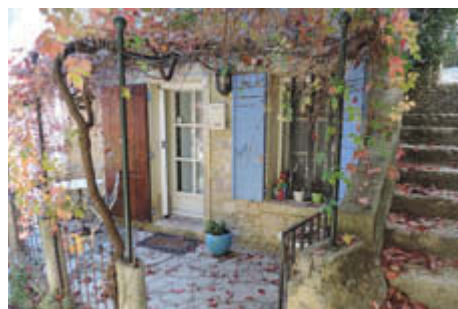
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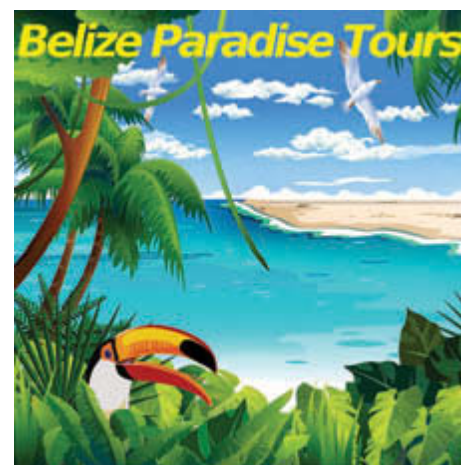
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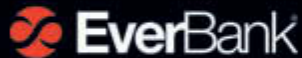
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IL'S CALENDAR OF EVENTS

FIND YOUR PARADISE IN PANAMA

Panama City • April 9 – 11, 2015

Over the years, Panama has built up a well-deserved reputation as a world-class retirement haven.

In the *pensionado* program, it offers the most comprehensive array of retirement benefits to be found anywhere in the world; 30% off public transport, 50% off entertainment, 20% off medical consultations and much, much more.

But there's a lot more to being a *pensionado* in Panama than retirement benefits. The country blends modernity with some of the lowest cost of living to be found anywhere; expect to pay a fraction of what you would at

home for quality real estate and everyday items.

Among the many low-cost benefits of life in Panama is the excellent standard of affordable health care to be found in urban areas; the Johns Hopkins-affiliated Punta Pacifica Hospital in Panama City is the most technologically advanced medical centre in Latin America.

Panama is blessed with a warm, salubrious climate that fosters some of Central America's most verdant rainforest.

You'll find a wealth of wildlife in Panama, and well-established expat communities ensure making friends is easy. The country's



Visit Panama City and take in the view from the lush surrounds of Cerro Ancon.

airports host services to many destinations globally.

At our **Fast Track Panama: Lifestyle and Opportunity Conference** in Panama City's new Hilton Hotel, we'll fill you in on everything you need to live a luxurious and laidback life in one of the world's best retirement destinations.

Our experts will guide you through the ins and outs of living in Panama, from how to find the best-value real estate to availing of the *pensionado* program and establishing your own business.

You'll get first-hand information and tips on learning Spanish, Panama's world-class health care system, insurance, and residence visas.

International Living editors Suzan Haskins and Dan Prescher—who have lived and travelled extensively throughout Latin America—will be on hand, as will *IL*'s Panama Editor Jessica Ramesch, to share their extensive knowledge of the country and the

amazing lifestyle it has to offer.

Other speakers will include offshore and asset protection expert Bob Bauman, Winton Churchill (a guru on how to fund your retirement overseas), and Panama real estate expert Margaret Summerfield, who will clue you in on the latest hotspots and future buying opportunities. For more information, see:

Intliving.com/contactevents. ■

UPCOMING EVENTS

Join us at our **Tenth Annual Ultimate Retire Overseas Conference** in Cancún, Mexico, from June 3–6 to find out all about a range of destinations where you can retire like royalty for less than \$3,100 a month. From the Orient to the Andes, we'll explore your best options in-depth and introduce you to our best contacts on the ground all over the world. For more information, see: Intliving.com/contactevents.

3 THINGS YOU CAN DO IN PANAMA CITY

1. Visit Casco Viejo. Panama City is full of architectural wonders, especially the colonial sector known as Casco Viejo. Founded in 1673, it's a dense warren of romantic ruins, stately plazas, and crumbling churches. Plan sightseeing with the help of informational site Cascoviejo.org. For great ambiance and food that's not overpriced, try the Tantaló Hotel restaurant on Avenue B. Then head to the rooftop bar for a nightcap. Insider tip: on weekends there is a nominal cover charge, but your entry is free when you show your dinner receipt.

2. Stock up on *molás*. Across town from Casco Viejo you'll find the ruins of Panama La Vieja, where Panama City was first founded nearly 500 years ago. You can still climb the cathedral tower and look over the original Plaza Mayor. Few tourists know that one of the best places in Panama to buy souvenirs and authentic handicrafts is right outside the gates. The most sought-after items are *molás*, brightly coloured cloth squares transformed into geometric designs via reverse appliqué. Prices range from \$20–\$120 depending on intricacy.

3. Explore the rainforest. Panama City boasts an impressive amount of rainforest. You'll find swaths in the Metropolitan Park and near the Clayton sector. A twenty-minute drive from Clayton you'll find some of Panama's most treasured eco-gems: Soberania Park (home to 55,000 acres of tropical rainforest and a championship 18-hole golf course), world-renowned bird-watching trail Pipeline Road, and The Panama Rainforest Discovery Centre. Ancon Expeditions offers comprehensive tours: Anconexpeditions.com.

Homes with Flowers, Orchards and Herbs

A view, good-value real estate, low cost of living, friendly locals...they're all important as you search for a new community to settle in abroad. But if you have a green thumb, you may have some special requirements for your dream home. You'll need good soil and the right light. Maybe you want multiple growing seasons, which is possible in some tropical areas. And you'll definitely want a climate suited to the type of garden you prefer.

Soon you could have your bromeliads and birds of paradise, shaded by palms, with tree-clinging orchids and passionflower vines trailing overhead in your tropical retreat. Or perhaps a fruit orchard and a vegetable and herb garden that you harvest regularly for your home cooking, baking, and canning. Maybe you're content with a simple rainbow of flowers in your yard to beautify your home.

Quality homes with mature gardens—or ground ready to be tilled so you can put down roots (in more ways than one)—can be found all over the world. ■



Bedfordshire, England: Classic Gardening

England has horticulture in its blood. Settle here and you'll be in the midst of the quintessential gardening culture, where many of the conventions and styles still used today bloomed, including a focus on a "natural" rather than manicured look. Combining woodlands, pasture, and river valleys with historic estates and modern urban centres, Bedfordshire offers the ideal spot for serious gardening, with the comforts of a city close by—you're just 40 kilometres north of London.

A two-bedroom historic cottage (wood beams and brick fireplace), including a nine-square-metre fenced yard with mature foliage, trellises, and plenty of room for your new planting, is \$498,050. A one-bedroom home with solarium and an established garden just outside the back door is \$308,995. See: Country-properties.co.uk.

Tuscany, Italy: A Painting Come Alive

Rolling hills and pastures, fields of lavender, still-vibrant ancient villages clinging to hillsides, and a landscape seemingly made of brushstrokes. The Tuscany region of Italy has captured the imagination for centuries. A rich cultural heritage, architectural marvels, and more await newcomers. And out beyond the historic towns, soil sown since before Roman times awaits new tenants.

Yes, Tuscany's popularity means there are pricey homes out there. But there are still plenty of deals to be had. A two-bedroom stone village house just 12 kilometres from the spa town of Bagni di Lucca is \$334,980. It has a 994-square-metre, partly-terraced garden space and an irrigation system installed, with a nice lawn, vines, fruit trees, and olive trees. Plus you have the view over the valley below.

On the smaller side is a two-bedroom apartment in a mountain village near Pescia for \$141,690. Your garden is on a large terrace overlooking the town, though you will have to get creative with space. See: Casatuscany.com.

Cuenca, Ecuador: The Perfect Climate for a Thriving Garden

The mountain town of Cuenca has been drawing expats for years now. This city at an altitude of 2500 metres in Ecuador's highlands has plenty of modern conveniences, as well as a picturesque colonial centre dating from the Spanish-colonial period. The temperature rarely reaches 23 degrees or goes below 7 degrees. It's comfortable for people—and plants. And when you're done for the day in the garden, why not take a stroll down cobblestone streets and stop for coffee in a tree-filled historic plaza, with the cathedral looming above.



Outside town is a four-acre farm with a three-bedroom house perfect for your large-scale gardening projects. The fruit trees already on-site will get you started. It's available for \$358,865. A riverside home, ringed with flowerbeds, a vegetable garden, fruit orchard, greenhouses, and a storage house for your tools, is a gardener's dream at \$445,490. See: Cuencarealestate.com.

Corfu, Greece: Fertile Ground in a Land of Legend

According to ancient Greek myth, the island of Corfu's first resident was a water nymph, lover to the god Poseidon. It was their love nest, of sorts. The island in the Ionian Sea has a mild Mediterranean climate that, along with beautiful beaches

and turquoise waters, has made it a popular destination for holidaymakers. The hot and dry summers, combined with wet winters, also create ideal growing conditions. In fact, an estimated three million olive trees blanket the countryside, interspersed with cypress trees and fields of wildflowers. All that, and you can relish the slow pace of village life, fresh seafood, and breathtaking views.

A two-bedroom house in the forest, set on an acre of flat land, will cost you \$316,790. Several fruit trees have already been planted and there's a perfect spot for a vegetable garden. See: Corfuhomes.gr. For \$95,285, you could have a three-bedroom, sea-view cottage set on the hillside overlooking the water. The garden has plenty of room for your botanical experiments. And you have grapevines and fruit trees as well. See: Hiddengreece.net.

Arenal, Costa Rica: A Lush Tropical Paradise

The Arenal region of Costa Rica is well-known for the 85-square-kilometre lake and 1,670-metre volcano that give the area its name. The climate has been described as an eternal spring—and the vegetation acts like it, with plants growing well year-round. Just about anywhere offers ideal growing conditions for orchids (they grow wild everywhere, too), heliconias, passionflower vines, and more. And a hike through the surrounding rain forest gives you a chance to see a wide variety of tropical plant life in the wild. While it has taken off as an expat destination in recent years, Arenal still has plenty of affordable properties available. And there's an added bonus for gardeners: an active garden club whose members gather regularly to trade information and plants.

A two-bedroom home, with a bonus *casita* (additional small building), set on a river with a lake view is \$185,620. For the same price, on the other side of the lake is a four-bedroom home surrounded by tropical flowers, as well as mango, lemon, and grapefruit trees, and banana plants. See: Pathfinderinternational.net/ContactUs/arenal/. ■

Rent in Gourmet Towns

The Michelin Guide and its rating system of three (the highest), two, or one stars is the gold standard for fine dining worldwide. Released annually since 1900, chefs worldwide live and die by their restaurant's listing in its pages. Today it serves food-oriented travellers heading to 23 countries, with 14 different editions. Luckily, there are cities where world-class dining is paired with reasonable rental prices to keep extended foodie holidays affordable.

One of the most-visited cities in Europe, Barcelona has also become quite a culinary hotspot. The city has 24 Michelin stars and is renowned for its tapas and seafood. Standout eateries include Dos Palillos, which offers tapas fused with flavours from Asia. For \$2,065 a month you can call a furnished two-bedroom apartment just off the main drag your home. In another downtown neighbourhood is a studio apartment for \$950 a month. See: Shbarcelona.com.

Denmark may not immediately come to mind when considering culinary destinations. But young chefs in Copenhagen are garnering recognition for innovative dishes that combine traditional Danish foods, with new tastes and techniques. Noma is the "in" restaurant, a two-starred place that has also been named the best restaurant in the world three times on the "top 50 restaurants" list sponsored each year by San Pellegrino.

A studio apartment in town is available for \$895 a month, unfurnished. For an unfurnished one-bedroom apartment in the city centre, you'll pay \$1,485 a month. See: Boligportal.dk.

No discussion of Michelin-rated restaurants is complete without a mention of Paris, with 10 three-star establishments, including L'Arpège and Guy Savoy. For \$1,915 you can rent a furnished studio apartment near the Arc de Triomphe. Or try another studio, furnished, near the Louvre museum for \$1,515 a month. See: Paristay.com.

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THE LAST WORD

By Wendy DeChambeau

The Simple Pleasures of a Stress-Free Life



I've just returned to Ecuador from a two week spell in the U.S. and I'm still processing the experience. It was fabulous to see friends again and connect with co-workers, but my time there was not quite as I expected. This was my first time back in three years and prior to my trip I kept thinking to myself that I was "going home." But as it turns out I wasn't as at home back in my mother country as I had imagined. You see, Ecuador has changed me in ways I never could have imagined and I'm a much different person than I was in 2011 it appears.

My first stop was Las Vegas for International Living's Fast-Track Your Retirement Overseas conference. The conference was fabulous and I loved chatting with potential expats and helping answer all of those big questions that need to be asked before an international move. But, in my downtime I began to notice some differences in myself. To start, I found during my first nights away, that I missed seeing the stars.

While the lights of the Las Vegas strip are a sight to see, it never truly gets dark in Vegas. I longed for my view from quiet Cotacachi where millions of celestial bodies are visible on a clear evening from the middle of the world. It may seem trivial, but I felt out of place surrounded by man-made replicas of world wonders, when typically I sleep right in the midst of the real thing.

It turns out that I'm also no longer content to stroll through my life while having little if any contact with the people around me. Las Vegas is a big city with an even bigger reputation, but despite the millions of people roaming the streets alongside me I felt surprisingly alone and isolated. I longed for Ecuador's streets full of friendly faces, where no one is a stranger, and where it's not unusual to have a nice long chat with the person next to you

on the bus or in line at the supermarket. Ecuador and her people have morphed my formerly introverted persona into that of a social extrovert.

Speaking of personality changes I also found that Ecuador has coaxed me into a state of tranquillity that I never possessed while living the western lifestyle. Leaving the bright lights, I set out on a road trip to see some of my family members. Due to a glitch (read user error) with Google Maps, what should have been a 13-hour drive turned into a 22-hour back-road adventure.

If this had occurred just a few years earlier my blood pressure would have gone sky high and there may or may not have been a few choice words thrown out in a tirade or two.

Not this time. These days I'm the picture of serenity. You might wonder how one little country could mellow me out, but it's really not hard to understand. In Ecuador I have almost no stress. I still work for a living, I still have a family to tend to, and there are responsibilities to be met.

But, thanks to the easy style of living in Latin America my tensions have melted away. Superb public transportation systems and towns centred on pedestrians mean that I don't have to worry about driving, traffic, or vehicle maintenance. Life is based on the here and now and priority goes to spending time with family and friends. All of this means that if I'm running a few minutes late to an appointment because I stopped to chat with one of the many friends I bump into on the way, it's not a tragedy.

In fact, in Ecuador very little is considered catastrophic because there's always tomorrow or the next day or the day

after that to get things done. Life is not rushed, it is enjoyed. Time away from my home country saves me from stress, but it also saves me money, too. A main course in a restaurant can be had for as little as \$3. The bus trip from Cotacachi to Otavalo will cost you 25 cents. For big ticket items like real estate, you can get a lot more for your dollar here than back home. A couple can live well here on \$1,730 a month, including rent.

Ecuador is not a consumerist society and while I can find and buy nearly anything I want here, it turns out that I don't need to. I'm not bombarded with advertising or hypermarkets packed wall to wall and floor to ceiling full of stuff. And so my life has become far simpler. So now

"Priority goes to spending time with family and friends. Life is not rushed, it is enjoyed."

I'm back in Cotacachi with a cup of tea and my laptop while a much-appreciated shower of rain is falling from the heavens. It's well into autumn back home and I'm hearing talk of the cold from friends. But here in Ecuador, despite the rainy weather, I'm perfectly comfortable in jeans and a long-sleeved

shirt—just as I was in August and in January and in every other month of the year. No heating bills, no cooling bills, and no winter wardrobe make for a happy life in my book.

So, no, I guess I didn't return home when I got on that plane, but I'm definitely home now. ■

Editor's Note: Wendy DeChambeau is *IL's* Ecuador Highlands' Correspondent and has lived in the

small town of Cotacachi with her husband and two sons for the last three years. To contact her directly, email: Ecuador@internationalliving.com.

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