

International Living's 2011 Retirement Index

The World's Top Ten Retirement Havens



Dear Reader,

Where in the world is the best place to retire? Mexico? France? Brazil? Maybe, Italy...or Ecuador? The list of possibilities is endless. And it is all, of course, based on personal preference. One man's paradise can be another man's hell.

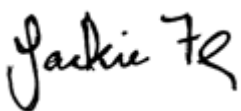
We here at *International Living* have been in the business of scouring the globe for the best retirement destinations around the globe for over 30 years. We know a good retirement location when we see one. And that's where we'd like to help you.

The world is always changing. And opportunity shows itself in new places all the time. That's why every year we take stock of the climate, cost of living, safety, infrastructure, accessibility of healthcare, and more, to we compile our **World's Top Retirement Havens**. We look specifically at the best opportunities worldwide for retirement living.

How does *International Living* determine its rankings? *IL* editors compile, weigh, rank, and rate a series of criteria including cost of living, infrastructure, healthcare, safety and stability, real estate, special benefits, immigration perks, etc. They rely on outside sources for much of this data as well as on input from those already living abroad.

In this report we give you our top 10 Retirement Havens and the reasons why we think these are the best places to consider if you are planning a retirement overseas.

Yours sincerely,



Jackie Flynn
Publisher, *International Living*

P.S. You can read more about the [Retirement Index and how it's scored, here](#).

The full and complete list of our 2011 World's Top Retirement Havens are available in the pages of our monthly publication *International Living* Magazine and on our information packed website.

[Follow this link](#) to find out how *International Living* can help you find you top retirement haven and live a happier, healthier life today.

10: Italy



They've given us Michelangelo, Raphael, and Botticelli... Pizza, gondolas, and scarlet Ferraris... Opera, ice cream, and Prada handbags. They've even given us *confetti*, those bits of colored paper that shower brides and grooms on wedding days. OK, they've given us the Mafia, too, but who wouldn't want to live in Italy, Europe's most intriguing and seductive country? Just think of its warmth, style, and wonderful food...its excitable people and their zest for life...its art treasures and the architectural glories of its magnificent past...

Even if you've never been there, Italy is one of those places that tugs at the heartstrings. And once you *have* been there, you're always looking for reasons to go back. Imagine being able to spend every springtime in Rome, Venice, or Florence...can't you just picture yourself meandering beside the Arno river on a perfect May evening when all the terracotta roofs and ancient palaces are bathed in that special Florentine glow?

But you don't have to spend all your time in Florence or any of the other great art cities to experience the magic. Italy's landscapes are as gorgeous as they are diverse. Historic walled towns, timeless villages crowning dozens of little hilltops like tiaras, and fields covered with bright yellow sunflowers. Gnarled olive groves and lemon, orange, and almond trees...golden beaches and jewel-like Alpine lakes...romantic, mysterious islands...smoldering Mount Etna...the glittering peaks of the snow-covered Alps and the Dolomites...

The Italian Lake district is admittedly well-trodden, but what do you know about the islands of Sardinia and Sicily? Or of Le Marché, an exquisite region on the eastern coast that shares the same luscious Renaissance landscapes as Tuscany and Umbria, but where properties are much more sensibly priced? Or of Apulia in the deep south, a languid land of olive trees fringed by the turquoise Adriatic Sea, and noted for its curious dome-shaped *trulli* houses? When you're considering retiring to another country, one of the main questions is "What kind of properties are available and how much do they cost?" Although Italy is not generally perceived as being a bargain location for property buyers, there's something for everybody.

Wondering if you can afford to retire in Italy? Well, you can. Although the popular areas of Rome, Florence, and Milan are admittedly expensive, not all regions are as unaffordable as you

might expect. In rural areas and small towns, plenty of homes are available for less than \$100,000. Often a lot less...

9: Malta



Don't be embarrassed if you can't pinpoint Malta on a map. It's not on everyone's radar, and mostly unheard of by Americans. Malta is anchored almost in the center of the Mediterranean Sea, 60 miles from the Italian island of Sicily, which is linked to Malta by regular 90-minute ferry service. There is a modern airport at Luqa (on Malta) with flights to numerous other European countries. Rome is but one hour away by plane.

The Republic of Malta isn't a solitary island, but an archipelago of three islands and three islets. Not surprisingly, the names of the islets mean nothing to most people, as they are little more than rocks in the ocean. (In case you're wondering, they're called Filfla, St. Paul's Island, and Cominotto.) Filfla was used for target practice by the British navy, so it is probably even smaller than it used to be. While Comino is classified as one of the three islands in the Maltese archipelago proper, it is also minuscule: just a few square miles in size and home to just one summer-season hotel and five farming families. However, there are 28,000 people living on the green and rural island of Gozo. This island is one of the best-kept secrets in the Mediterranean, a place where time really does seem to have stood still.

Until independence was granted in 1964, Malta had been a British colony for 150 years. Many trappings of the Empire remain: scarlet phone-boxes, blue-lamp police stations, pillar-boxes bearing Queen Victoria's insignia, cricket and bowling clubs, cafes serving warm beer and roast beef dinners, troops of neatly dressed boy scouts, driving on the left-hand side of the road...

And there's no language barrier here. Just about everybody on Malta speaks English as well as Malti. Both are official languages. Similar to Arabic, but written in the Latin script, Malti is a Semitic language. It also embraces bits of French and Italian.

8: Costa Rica



If you're ready for *la pura vida*, "the pure life," you might want to consider a Costa Rica retirement. This country of just over 4 million is tucked between Nicaragua to the north, Panama to the south, the Pacific Ocean to the west, and the Caribbean Sea to the east.

Costa Rica has a lot going for it...it's a nature-lover's dream, with green-carpeted mountains, oh-wow volcanoes, and that blue, blue ocean.

It's got top-quality, affordable healthcare and is known as one of Latin America's most peaceful nations (it has enjoyed over 60 years of uninterrupted democratic rule). Costa Rica has a wide variety of inexpensive housing, along with a wealth of every imaginable activity to keep you busy and happy.

Costa Rica is one of the most popular countries in the world for second home buyers, and it's not difficult to understand why. The country's Pacific and Caribbean Coasts enjoy tropical climates, while much of the Central Valley experiences spring-like weather all year around. It's also a small country—about the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined—meaning you can travel from the Valley to the shore in less time than it takes many Americans to commute to work.

Costa Rica is a prime location for outdoor activities. Popular hobbies here include fishing, bird watching, scuba diving, snorkeling, kayaking, surfing, and horseback riding. If this level of activity sounds too strenuous...you can dine and dance under the stars, or just relax around your backyard pool.

7: Uruguay



From its Old-World theaters and opera houses to its jazz festivals and exquisite restaurants, Uruguay looks and feels like Europe, but it is much more affordable. The truth is that Uruguay is one of the most diverse, affordable, and sophisticated countries in the region. It is a special place. From *gaucho* (cowboy) country to small towns to those stunning white-sand beaches, a quest for beautiful beaches and low property prices is certainly worthwhile.

The diversity and quality of life in Uruguay is everywhere. You'll speed down the excellent highways—flying past ancient cars from the 20s through the 50s—passing *gauchos* in traditional dress tending their herds along the way. This is Uruguay.

Or you'll enjoy swimming in the South Atlantic Ocean, sunning yourself on the beach of South America's most dazzling beach resort. And while doing this you can look forward to a mouthwatering seafood dinner along the water, a visit to a highrise casino, perhaps followed by a stroll through one of the most exclusive shopping districts in this part of the world. This, too, is Uruguay.

So is the old city of Montevideo, with its shady sycamore-lined streets, fine restaurants, granite structures, colorful markets, and artisan fairs. And also Colonia with its historic buildings and authentically restored Old Town, as well as La Paloma with its miles of unspoiled beaches, and Chuy, sitting on the border with Brazil with its wild-west atmosphere.

Uruguay is located between Brazil and Argentina, and is the second smallest country in South America after Suriname. It boasts 120 miles of Atlantic coastline, and 270 miles on the Uruguay River. The country is something of a paradox. South America's second-smallest country—about the size of Missouri—it looks and feels like Europe, but the prices are Third-World. If extensive infrastructure, ease of access, and an established expatriate community are retirement necessities for you...you can have all that in Uruguay.

6: France



La vie française. Imagine relaxing in the garden of your own French home, a pretty stone cottage set among orchards, vineyards, and flowery meadows. The sun is shining, there's not a cloud in the sky. The only sound is the drone of honeybees and the blissful strains of one of Satie's *Gymnopédies* playing in the background. You've just returned from the market, and now you're savoring the thought of lunch. It's such a perfect day, you decide to dine picnic-style, spread out over an old oak table under a shady canopy of trees.

Freshly baked baguettes, a ripe Camembert cheese, a tangy ratatouille of tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant—and don't forget to add those deliciously plump black olives straight from the stallholder's barrel.

This pleasant-sounding lifestyle can be more than just a daydream. *La belle France* (beautiful France) seems to have more than its fair share of good things—not least of which are food, wine, and *haute couture*.

Whether you're looking to retire to Europe, relocate, or simply plan an extended adventure, France should be at the top of your list of possibilities. It has all the ingredients that we at *International Living* look for: a good climate, unspoiled countryside, top-notch culture, excellent healthcare, affordable real estate, colorful traditions and history, and, of course, the glitter and sophistication of Paris. It's not surprising that France is the world's favorite destination, receiving in excess of 82 million overseas visitors each year.

5: New Zealand



Wine festivals, whale-watching, and concerts in the park...mile after mile of coastal walks...geysers, glaciers, and the Southern Alps. For those who love uncrowded places and a temperate climate, New Zealand is one of the world's most livable countries. Home to around 4.4 million people, it's one of its safest, too.

Divided into the North Island and South island, it's known as *Aotearoa* ("the Land of the Long White Cloud") to its Maori inhabitants. But there's no need to learn a new language. Generations of immigrants from the English-speaking world have long been drawn to a lifestyle that puts as much emphasis on play as on work.

Kiwis see nothing odd about festooning Christmas trees in tinsel when it's rapidly approaching their Midsummer's Day. While the northern hemisphere is wrapped in winter, they're enjoying long evenings at the beach or fishing from sailboats. Most towns are near the coast—you're never far from the sound of the ocean.

Salaries can be low compared to North America, but so are most living costs, including healthcare. For residents, accident and emergency care is free. It's estimated that 70% of Kiwis don't even bother with medical insurance.

Although New Zealand's immigration department doesn't offer a permanent retirement visa, you could spend part of the year here. If you have substantial funds, another option is a renewable temporary retirement visa. And some people in their 50s obtain permanent residence as skilled workers, with a view to working for a short time and then retiring.

4: Spain



Picture a sun-drenched, white, house with a shady courtyard, perched on a cliff-top site in Spain. With the deep blue sea beyond, and an olive grove nearby, it's the stuff of which fantasies are made. Beaches...mountains...fabulous cities...cracking festivals, and, of course, guaranteed sunshine. It's not surprising that Spain is the most popular country for Europeans seeking a home overseas.

There's far more to Spain than golf courses and a concrete sprawl of look-alike apartments. Venture a few miles into the Andalusian hinterland, into the far west, along the Bay of Biscay and along the Costa de la Luz and Costa Azahar. The "real Spain" is waiting for you.

And then of course there's our new favorite Spanish destination...Barcelona. There's something electric about port cities...and Barcelona is definitely high voltage. Spain's spruced-up second city has a 24-hour lifestyle and is popular for weekend breaks with Europeans. They come to meander down Las Ramblas with its bird sellers and all-night newsstands; sip *cava* (Catalan champagne) in the Café de l'Opera; climb the mosaic towers of Gaudi's temple, the Sagrada Familia; wander the Barrio Gotic's twisty streets; eat \$15 *menu del dias* in fish restaurants in working-class Barceloneta.

It's a wonderful city in which to live or invest...and is still worth a look at if you are considering European real estate.

3: Panama



Panama offers a very comfortable retirement solution, in part because the nation is much more developed than most visitors expect. Many are shocked by the modernity of Panama and the clusters of skyscrapers that define Panama City's skyline. All of the amenities one could wish for are readily available.

In Panama, you will enjoy the benefits of a developing economy where you can still take a taxi across town for a buck or two, get your haircut for a couple of dollars, or enjoy dinner for two with a bottle of wine at one of the finest restaurants in Panama City for a mere \$30. There are also lots of activities for you to enjoy, from jazz clubs to art openings to English-language theater performances. You may be wondering what you will do when you retire...but in Panama, you will never find yourself bored.

Outside the city you will find the true treasures of Panama. There are beautiful beaches everywhere, with the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the Pacific on the other. But there's more to Panama than a sophisticated city and gorgeous beaches. There are rolling green tropical mountains, fertile farmlands, lush rainforests, and small towns where foreign visitors are made to feel like family. There truly is something for everyone in Panama.

First-World infrastructure in paradise

Panama is safe, stable, and friendly. And it boasts the best healthcare and infrastructure in Central America. But these are only the bold headlines. As you take time to learn more about Panama, you'll find it keeps looking better and better. Its climate is unrivalled in the world, with tropical rain forests, temperate mountains, and warm, tropical white sand beaches. Its wildlife is abundant, with most of the bird species in North America, and its pristine natural setting is an eco-tourist's dream. No wonder that the Smithsonian's Tropical Research Center is located in Barrio Colorado. Plus, unlike its neighbors, Panama is a stranger to hurricanes.

U.S. presence has been such a strong factor in Panamanian life that it can be difficult to remember you are in Central America. Highrise condos of chrome and steel rim the wide Avenida Balboa and overlook the Bay of Panama. Modern shopping centers offer all the latest

brands and gadgets anyone could possibly need. Panama City is a bustling, vibrant, and exciting metropolis.

2: Mexico



With its moon-lit fiestas, languid white-sand beaches, ancient colonial towns set in the rugged Sierras...Mayan pyramids rising from the misty Yucatan jungle...little silver mining towns where the winding streets seem to run straight up into the clouds...weekly markets where just a few dollars can fill your shopping bag to the brim with fresh fruits and vegetables...fishing villages where the boats land in the morning with the giant snapper you'll have for lunch, sautéed with garlic or simmered in a Diablo sauce that will make you call out for another ice-cold *cerveza*. Or buy the whole fish right off the boat for a few bucks (plus the 50 cents you pay the fisherman's son to carry it home for you) and cook it yourself.

It's no wonder so many retirees are starting new lives in Mexico.

Whether your vision of the ideal retirement involves shopping, fishing, sunbathing, diving, biking, mountain climbing, parasailing, collecting crafts, visiting archeological sites, partying, going to concerts, attending the theater, or fine dining, in Mexico has all of these activities, and more.

Stately Spanish Colonial cities in Mexico are steeped in tradition, and soaring baroque church spires overlook gracious squares. Here you can dine in elegant cafés, and browse upscale shops on the very spots where the heroes of the Revolution declared independence from Spain and forged a new country. For all these reasons, and many more, Mexico is one of the world's top destinations for those dreaming of a relaxed and romantic new life abroad.

Wherever you go in Mexico, the people will charm you, the natural beauty will seduce you, and the remarkably affordable cost of living will entice you to stay.

Whether your dream retreat is a graceful colonial home with lavish gardens, a simple beachfront bungalow where you can prop up your feet on the rail and watch the tide roll in, an expansive hacienda with enough acreage for horses to roam, or a cliffside villa with sunset views and cool, steady breezes, you are likely to find it in Mexico.

Slow down...and live the Mexican way

Whatever your motives for settling in Mexico—whether you hope to escape the fast pace of life up north, enjoy a better lifestyle for less than you'd pay at home, or discover a safe haven where the crime rate is low and you can enjoy a “small-town” existence—you're likely to find your quality of life improved in this country.

Things take longer, so you learn to slow down. Goods and services cost less, so you can afford the kind of luxuries only the very wealthy enjoy up north, like a maid, a cook, and a gardener. If you're looking for a simpler way of life in a place where you don't have to give up the amenities to which they are accustomed, then no further than Mexico. With its close physical proximity to the U.S., Mexico enjoys many of the good roads, high-speed communications, and top-notch healthcare that you'd expect from its neighbor to the north. Those who relocate find it is easy to live and do business in Mexico. The paradox to its increasing modernity and its attractiveness is that things still move a bit slower in Mexico.

You can enjoy a relaxed and refreshing lifestyle, like something out of a 19th-century travelogue, and yet it isn't half a world away.

And the winner is.....

1: Ecuador



Most *International Living* readers know that Ecuador has been one of our favorite locations for overseas investment and retirement for many years. In fact, we ranked Ecuador as the world's best retirement destination in 1999, due to the amazing values created by a series of calamities—economic, political, and natural—that the country weathered in the previous two years. Now in 2011, for the third year running, we've once again picked Ecuador as the best place in the world to retire.

Property prices and the cost of living remain inexpensive compared to the U.S., and downright cheap next to Europe. Unlike other Latin American countries, real estate prices are holding steady in the face of the economic downturn.

Today, you can rent a furnished, two-bedroom apartment in an historic center for \$220 per month or buy a large condo for \$66,000. You can live well for \$600 month...and like royalty for double that.

Combine this with Ecuador's equatorial sunshine; a choice of spectacular mountain, high plains, jungle or coastal settings; plus the welcoming nature of the Ecuadorian people, and you have a combination of quality of life and investment opportunity that's hard to beat.

The quality of life is unbeatable

Low prices alone do not make an ideal retirement destination. There are plenty of places the world over where you can buy cheap land, but you wouldn't want to live there. This is not the case with Ecuador. You'll enjoy a top-notch quality of life here. If you like the outdoors, have dreamed of owning a Spanish colonial home in a colonial city, or want to spend hours strolling on an undeveloped beach, then Ecuador will be perfect for you.

Ecuador is gentle...safe...healthy...private...civil. As one expat put it: "It's like we are living in the U.S in the 1950s." You're guaranteed a quality of life that just plain doesn't exist anymore in the States. Up north, violence, materialism, and increasingly intrusive government policies

have whittled away the last vestiges of the American Dream. Yet here you're guaranteed a truly extraordinary lifestyle. And that makes Ecuador the perfect place to retire...or reinvent yourself. You'll find like-minded company when you do.

In Ecuador, every cliché you've heard about living large on little money—about settling into the lap of luxury on even a pensioner's budget—is true. Ecuador is one of the world's cheapest places to live.

From the cost of hiring a full-time maid to the price of produce and dinner at a good restaurant, you'll be surprised at how little it costs to live in Ecuador. We conducted an unscientific survey of our expatriate friends and the conclusion was that it costs about 60% less to live in Ecuador than it does for a similar standard of living in the U.S.

And healthcare in Ecuador is cheap too. An appointment with the doctor averages \$25 (without insurance). A psychiatrist will charge \$30 to \$40 for a half-hour session. Brand name medicines usually cost less than in the U.S. Generics, which are widely available, are also much cheaper.

Find great opportunities everywhere



There are no restrictions on foreign-owned real estate in Ecuador. Foreign owners have the same rights as citizens and the ownership is fee-simple and outright. This is one of the few countries in the world that does not keep a separate list of foreign property owners. In 2008, Ecuadorian voters passed a new constitution that guarantees property rights and reinforces the country's tradition of welcoming foreigners.

While you can find great buys all over the country, some of the best buys right now are on Ecuador's 1,400 miles of Pacific coastline. While prices have soared out of reach in Central America for many foreign buyers, they remain reasonable here and have only showed strong appreciation in recent years.

It's also one of the few places where a foreign resident or visitor can blend easily into the community, being welcomed into a new circle of friends and a new way of life, with relative

ease. As a foreigner here you'll be treated with respect, and the people will be proud to get to know you.

All of these things combined, make Ecuador our **2011 World's Top Retirement Havens winner**