

International Living's 2012 Retirement Index

The World's Top Ten Retirement Havens



Dear Reader,

Where in the world is the best place to retire? Mexico? France? Thailand? 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.

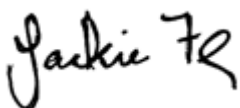
We here at *International Living* have been in the business of scouring the globe for the best retirement destinations around the globe for over 30 years. We know a good retirement location when we see one. And that's where we'd like to help you.

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, health care, ease of integration, real estate, special benefits, climate, etc. This is a qualitative assessment based on real-world data gathered on the ground.

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. P.S. The full and complete list of our 2012 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: Honduras



Doors carved with Mayan monkey gods lead into the master bedroom suite. Beautiful wooden furniture—a king-size bed, an eight-foot-tall mahogany wardrobe, a giant pigeonhole desk—stand out in contrast along the white walls. Marble steps take you into a giant, beautifully tiled shower room. The sound of waves fills the house as gentle ocean breezes waft through cotton curtains. A large picture window looks out to the Caribbean. All you can see for miles and miles is the white sand bay verging the blue-green sea, stretching towards the horizon.

Honduras has all the makings of the perfect retirement haven: lush countryside with beaches and mountains, a tropical climate, international airports, safe cities, friendly people, and, most importantly, a very low cost of living. Expat Daphne Newman lives very well on just \$1,400 a month here. The country produces rice, beans, plantains, bananas, mangos, pineapples, papayas, melons, oranges, and more, for pennies a kilo. Seafood is inexpensive and plentiful along the entire Caribbean coast.

Honduras has a varied landscape. The Bay Islands provide unparalleled Caribbean beauty, where dense tropical foliage spills out onto white-sand beaches to meet tropical waters. Not far away, the northern coast recedes into a backdrop of mountains and cloud forests that slope down to valleys to make way for rivers. Vast expanses of land on a central plateau are farmed for coffee, tobacco, wheat, fruits, and vegetables. Large cattle ranches also occupy much of the flat lands. Elsewhere, mahogany and other hardwood trees flourish.

Honduras is a place where you can indulge your dreams, even on a limited budget...a place where Caribbean breezes lift fresh ocean air through your windows...where the sunlight glints off the water at odd angles...where the sound of waves lapping at the shore is just hypnotic enough to spirit away the dissonance of the 21st century...

9: Thailand



Picture yourself wandering through gilded temples...exploring Bangkok's hidden canals by long-tail boat...riding an elephant down jungle trails...meeting Hmong hill-tribe villagers and treasure-hunting for hand-loomed silk, teakwood carvings and exotic curios—all at a fraction of the price you'd pay back home.

Now let's spin the kaleidoscope to white-sand beaches, swaying coconut palms and an evening chorus of cicadas. Rising from jade and turquoise waters are scenes from an oriental fairy-tale: a myriad islands girdled by coral gardens...bizarre limestone outcrops smothered in spinach-green vegetation...incredible sunsets with a slow-burning sun dipping into the sea like a giant red lantern.

Thailand has a lot of options. Some foreign retirees choose to live in the hubbub atmosphere of Bangkok. Some live in the north of Thailand where life is quiet, peaceful, and very inexpensive. Others choose the south for its beautiful beaches.

Living in Thailand is unbelievably cheap. There are many places where you can dine well and still leave the table with change from \$5. In fact, go north, and you'll also find that 20 baht noodle stalls still exist—that's just 60 cents!

You can rent a really nice place just about anywhere in the country for just \$500 a month. We know of one expat who pays \$222 a month for his beachside bungalow with air conditioning, hot water, and Wi-Fi. A full check-up in a modern hospital by an American-trained doctor will cost you less than \$40.

8: 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.

7: Nicaragua



The great American author Mark Twain wrote after an 1897 visit to Nicaragua:

“What a home one might make among their shady forest, their sunny slopes, their breezy dells, after he had grown weary of the toil, anxiety, and unrest of the bustling driving world.”

...and we couldn't agree more.

Nicaragua is one of the most beautiful countries in the Americas. It boasts a dramatic Pacific coastline; long, gentle Caribbean beaches; and volcanoes and freshwater lakes that dot the hilly inland. Colonial cities like Granada and León offer visitors a taste of days gone by. And Managua is rapidly becoming a real First-World city with top-notch theaters and a range of international restaurants.

The cost of living here is very affordable. In the colonial city of Granada, expats are spending around \$1,200 a month. A small house can be \$500 to \$1,000 a month to rent. You can get a fantastic steak dinner in the finest restaurant for around \$13. Regular fare at typical restaurants runs about half that and a “local” meal is \$2 to \$3. The local beers, which are good, cost from \$0.75 to \$1.50.

Add to that the very reasonable real estate value here and you could have your perfect retirement or second home destination. Whether you want to live somewhere quiet, near the coast where you can sit back and listen to the waves gently lapping the sea shore or you'd prefer the hustle and bustle of a colonial city with everything you could possibly need (at half the price of the U.S.)...then you should definitely take a closer look at Nicaragua.

6: 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

5: Colombia



Located at the tip of South America, Colombia is where the Pacific and the Caribbean collide with the Andes and the Amazon. It's a country that is more beautiful, dramatic, and diverse than nearly any other. It offers sparkling colonial cities in the highlands and world-famous (and safe) resorts along the Caribbean. Cartagena, a walled colonial city on those turquoise shores, is one of Spanish America's most beautiful enclaves.

What's more, Colombia boasts beautiful areas where the cost of living is the lowest you'll find anywhere in South America. Just three hours from Miami, Colombia welcomes nonstop flights into Bogota, Medellin and Cartagena.

Colombia had a lot to offer *International Living* readers. Critical things—like low cost of living, inexpensive properties and a colorful and diverse culture. There isn't a single segment of the *IL* membership concerned with climate, culture and lifestyle that couldn't find their niche in Colombia.

Colombia offers something that will appeal to just about everyone. And you'll find that Colombia is a more-developed country than most in Latin America, with the infrastructure, modern products and services you'd expect in a country on the move.

Colombia can offer you a sophisticated, modern urban scene or a cabin in a remote section of desert...a colonial walled city by the sea, or a sleepy Caribbean beachside town...spring-like weather high in the Andes, steamy tropics or the "perfect" weather in between...North American enclaves or indigenous outposts. Unless you've got your heart set on snow, you're almost certain to find your ideal spot in Colombia.

4: Malaysia



Conjuring up all the mysteries of Asia, Malaysia is a former British colony. The sultans, head-hunters, pirates, and gin-swilling English rubber planters of the Victorian age have long since gone, but the country remains as colorful as ever. Beyond the lofty skyscrapers of the capital, Kuala Lumpur, its dramatic canvas is embroidered with tropical beaches, mountains, dense rainforest, and vividly green tea plantations.

It's Malay...it's Chinese...it's Indian...it's international. Influences from across Asia and beyond have melded together here to create an extraordinary cross-cultural melting pot of customs, dress, architecture, and cuisine. Along with foreign expats from around the globe, the country is home to Malay Malays, Chinese Malays, Hindu Malays, and Sikh Malays.

You certainly won't go short of anything in Kuala Lumpur (KL), or the other popular expat hangout, Penang Island. Malaysia has both public and private health care with medical expertise on a par with western countries. Most hospitals and health care facilities are staffed by English speaking professionals with international qualifications. Internet coverage here is on a par with services in France and Italy...the cost of living is cheap and it's easy to live here (English is widely spoken). And with some of the world's most stunning white-sand beaches, there's a lot to like about Malaysia.

3: 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 cliff side 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.

2: 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.

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 2012, for the fourth 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. For \$50,000 you can buy a penthouse suite in a colonial town or a beachfront condo. You can rent a furnished, two-bedroom apartment on the beach for \$500 a month or a condo in Cuenca for the same. Real estate here is so affordable that some expats have two homes. Ron and Terresa Moore, for example, bought a two-bedroom condo in the Andean town of Cotacachi and a new two-bedroom condo on the beach in Crucita—grand total \$111,000. Now they split their time between the two.

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. You can live comfortable here on \$800 a month...double that, and you can live like royalty.

And health care 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.

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 **2012 World's Top Retirement Haven winner.**