

# International Living's 2013 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.

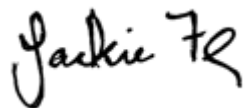
We here at *International Living* have been in the business of scouring the globe for the best retirement destinations around the globe for over 30 years. We know a good retirement location when we see one. And that's where we'd like to help you.

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 **Annual Global Retirement Index**. 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jackie FR". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.

Jackie Flynn

Publisher, *International Living*

P.S. Our full and complete 2013 Retirement Index is 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 your top retirement haven and live a happier, healthier life today.

## # 10: 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 a regular 90-minute ferry service. There is a modern airport at Luqa (on Malta) with flights to numerous other European countries. Rome is just 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.

## # 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 two new favorite Spanish destinations...Murcia and Northern Spain.

Located in the southeast of Spain, Murcia is a region that doesn't attract hordes of vacationers. Yet, there are incredibly beautiful beaches, calm seas, pretty countryside, and small historic towns. The majority of this attractive region has managed to escape the fate of its brasher coastal neighbors...scarred by high rises and ongoing unpalatable construction work. Instead, Murcia boasts an alluring combination of simple beauty, rich cultural heritage and welcoming people.

It's a charming region in which to live or invest and definitely worth a look at if you are considering European real estate. Murcia is affordable. You can live here for a fraction of what it would cost in many other areas in Europe.

Northern Spain is famous for the pilgrim route, the Camino de Santiago, as well as being one of Ernest Hemmingway's favorite European haunts. This part of Spain has a lot to offer—the stunning Pyrenees, the beaches of the Basque country, bull running in Pamplona, and a quality and cost of living that is near impossible to beat. This is also Spain's wine country, so if you enjoy the odd tippie, you'll be in heaven here.



## # 7: 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 non-stop 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.

## # 6: Uruguay



From its Old-World theaters and opera houses to its jazz festivals and exquisite restaurants, Uruguay looks and feels like Europe. 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 high-rise 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. If extensive infrastructure, ease of access, and an established expatriate community are retirement necessities for you...you can have all that in Uruguay.

## # 5: 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 health care 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.



## # 4: 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.

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.

## # 3: 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.

## # 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. High-rise 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 2013, for the fifth 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 comfortably here on \$900 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 **2013 Annual Global Retirement Index winner**.