



- News
- Bay Area News
- Breaking News
- California
- Crime
- Data Center
- Earthquake Center
- Education
- My Town
- Obituaries
- Traffic
- Weird News

- Most 00wed Most E-Mailed
- (From the last 12 hours)
- Livermore family the subject of Marlee Matlin reality show
 - Former car lot is new home for Hayward congregation
 - Car goes into creek in Walnut Creek, at least one dead
 - Two dead, one wounded in two Oakland shootings
 - Two injured in Oakland shooting
 - One dead, three in life-threatening condition after shooting in San...

For some East Bay retirees, Mexico an affordable alternative

By Kathleen Kirkwood
Correspondent

Posted: 04/07/2010 12:00:00 AM PDT
Updated) 04 /08/2010 02:38:14 PM PDT

Brad Billingsley could have been waiting for his tee time at an Arizona golf course. Instead the former Lafayette resident and his wife Linda were in a lagoon off Cabo San Lucas, snapping photos of gray whales bobbing next to their small charter boat.

"Every day, it's an adventure here," Brad Billingsley said. "It's added 20 years to my life."

Brad, 62, and Linda Billingsley, 61, are among the "silver surge" of baby boomers seeking alternative retirement nests in Mexico, according to a recent report by the International Community Foundation.

It's not certain how many U.S. retirees are living in Mexico -- a 2004 study puts it between 500,000 and 600,000 -- but the foundation and other researchers say the number is bound to increase as more boomers settle into their golden years and find Mexico an affordable alternative. Almost half the retirees living in coastal areas are getting by comfortably on less than \$1,000 per month, said the report, which cites the growth of real estate projects targeted at retirees as proof that expatriates are flocking south of the border.

The Billingsleys had seriously considered a retirement community with a golf course in central Arizona. But they lacked the enthusiasm for fairway living that seemed to consume retirees there. "Their entire lives were involved with golf," Brad Billingsley said.

In 2007, the couple became expatriates and settled into a \$300,000, two-bedroom beachfront condominium in Rosarito Beach, in Baja California.

They've made the most out of their retirement dollars, Brad Billingsley said. The cost of living -- from groceries to health care -- is low in their beachfront town and there's plenty to do, such as driving down the coast to Cabo, walking on the beach and shopping at the local mercado.

The couple lived in the Bay Area for 60 years, much of it in Walnut Creek and Lafayette.

Sometimes they miss their old haunts, especially bookstores, Brad Billingsley said. But like most expatriates surveyed in the foundation report, they return often to the states. The Billingsleys make a trip across the border to San Diego every few weeks.

Affordability, quality of life, weather and proximity to the U.S. were top reasons retirees chose Mexico, according to the survey of 842 expatriates conducted by the foundation.

"After the market crash of 2008, we wanted to better understand what was going on with retirees in Mexico," said Richard Ky, president and chief executive officer of the foundation, a Southern California-based nonprofit that works to increase charitable giving and volunteerism across U.S. borders. In an 88-question survey of retirees 50 and older, the foundation found that expatriates had weathered the economic storm well.

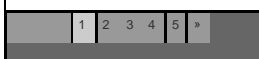
As survey snapshots: Retirees' biggest complaint is litter, while their favorite pastime is walking on the beach. More than three-quarters own a home. Almost 44 percent get by comfortably on less than \$1,000 per month and 61 percent are married -- slightly less than the U.S. average of 65 percent for the same age group.

The foundation's 17-page report, released in March, deals with demographics and day-to-day basics such as public safety concerns and household expenses of retirees in coastal areas such as Cancun, Rosarito Beach, Rocky Point and Puerto. Four follow-up studies over the next few months will tackle topics that include the impact on Mexico's environment, health care accessibility, real estate and civic involvement by U.S. retirees.

Crime concerns affect mostly tourists



Alamed resident Bob Hansen, right, after a fishing trip in Manzanillo, Mexico, where he plans ...



Related
[JOURNAL: U.S. retirement trends in Mexican coastal communities](#)

Top Classifieds

RENTALS JOBS REAL ESTATE

LEXUS 2003 EX30 ...
HONDA 1983 Odyssey ATV
Coff ...
OLDSMOBILE 1962 Starfire
al ...
PORSCHE '48...
WET & DRY B...
MERCEDES 1988 560 SL,
B...
HARLEY 2002 Sprtstr w/
upgrade ...
WANTED Small Truck From
1990...

All Listings



Aweakening American economy, U.S. State Department travel alerts and worries about the H1 N1 virus have hurt tourist travel numbers to Mexico over the past year, but the country still remains an attractive haven for retirees, said Anne McEnany, co-author of the report and the foundation's senior adviser for environment and conservation.

Reports of narcotics-related violence, especially in border cities like Tijuana and Nogales, gave many retirees jitters initially, McEnany said. After they've settled into their new homes, anxiety fades away.

"They said they felt completely safe and that the media was over-hyping the narco-violence," McEnany said. The impact was on friends and family, who changed their minds about visiting, she said.

"I'm really saddened to see coverage of (Mexican) crime in the media," said Doug Gray, 60, a retired public safety officer from Livermore.

He and his wife Cyndi recently purchased a condominium in Manzanillo, a port city between Puerto Vallarta and Acapulco. They say they feel as safe -- if not safer -- walking around the mercados and boulevards as they do in Livermore.

Cyndi Gray said her best moment in Manzanillo was sitting on little plastic chairs at a cafe, watching waves roll in from the Pacific, sipping margaritas and eating coconut shrimp.

"We really love the pace," she said. "It's a slower pace and you can sit down there and get into the groove. I can unplug."

The Grays have yet to live there full-time; Cyndi, 48, is still working.

Ellen Fields, another expat from California, lives in Merida, on the Yucatán Peninsula.

Her adopted city is about 22 miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico -- close, but not part of the coastal regions surveyed by the foundation. It has a reputation for being safe and hasn't been affected by crime associated with border cities. "The Yucatán is not touched by that," Fields said, adding, "I've never felt unsafe here."

As self-described "dot-bomb refugee," Fields and her husband James run yucatanliving.com, a Web site for expatriates. They moved to Merida from San Luis Obispo in 2002 and never looked back.

Ellen Fields says she's enchanted by the Old World feel of the markets and people. "People in Yucatán are very welcoming. It's a very gracious culture," she said. "You walk down the street here and people say hello to you."

One of the things she misses about California: "Mountains. It's flat as a pancake here."

Fields recommends living and working in Mexico, but warns that it takes a lot of planning. "You can't come down here expecting someone to hire you," Fields said. And learn the language, she advises.

Although Fields isn't quite fluent, she says she can now hold a conversation without thinking about it.

About 48 percent of those surveyed in the foundation's report were fluent or spoke intermediate-level Spanish, McEnany said. Even though many service businesses in Mexico have English-speaking staffers, there's no substitute for learning the language, she said.

Retirees may settle in only to find they can't interact.

"They do the hobby thing and then after about a year they get bored," McEnany said. "They are interested in getting involved in the community but they don't have the language skills."

One pitfall of expatriate living comes when communities "tend to circle around themselves" and don't reach out to their adopted country, McEnany said. In addition, English-oriented businesses and the proliferation of big-box outlets like Walmart, Sam's Club and Costco around near retirement hubs have made it even easier for Americans to isolate themselves from Mexican culture.

In the survey, about 88 percent of respondents said they feel somewhat fully integrated into their new country. Nevertheless, most retirees continue to "see themselves as visitors in someone else's country," McEnany said.

The foundation is keenly interested in what U.S. retirees are doing with their time. Its chief goal is to assist American donors in charitably supporting communities abroad. The largest group of foundation donors consists of American expatriates in northwest Mexico.

Bob Hansen, 52, of Alameda said he's aiming to retire in Manzanillo because of the community there. Like most retirees in the foundation survey, he visited several times before deciding to buy. Three years ago, he purchased a fixer-upper on the beach for \$64,000.

Hansen has made many friends there and loves the lifestyle. "I have a huge pool of friends there," he said.

He met one close Mexican friend after anchoring his sailboat close to a small village called Colimilla, near Manzanillo. A fisherman helped guide him to shore and afterward they cooled off with a cola.

"I could hardly speak Spanish and he didn't speak English well either, but we had a connection of the souls," Hansen said. "After the drinks, we got in his old truck and he drove all over the area showing me all the beautiful places in the area."

Hansen purchased his home the next year and he stayed with his new friend in a nearby village while the sale cleared.

"I ended up being introduced to some of the kindest and warmest people on earth in that wonderful time I stayed in this village," Hansen said.

Quality of life a top draw

Kathie Parker, formerly of Oakland, can attest to that. A third-generation Californian who moved in 2008 to Merida, Parker said she doesn't miss the stress of living in the Bay Area.

"I never plan to move back to California," she said.

Parker, 60, is a retired masseuse and moved with her partner Holly Smith in June 2008. They sold their home in Oakland and purchased a three-bedroom, three-bath home with a pool for less than \$200,000.

But he insists that quality of life was her top concern. "I didn't just choose this place because it was cheap," Parker said. "I wanted to live here."

She visits and talks daily with Yucatecan friends in Merida and is taking Spanish classes. Along with a group of other expats, she participated last year in a U.S. National Day of Service. They raised enough money to buy chairs and tables for a local school library.

"There are a lot of (Americans) who live here who want to make it as American as they possibly can," Parker said. "We moved to Mexico to be with Mexicans. The people here are wonderful. You just have to try."

   [Print](#) [Email](#) [Font Resize](#) [Return to Top](#)

Comments

Please keep your comments respectful of others by avoiding name-calling and other inappropriate remarks.

[FAQ: Article commenting how-tos and tips](#)

Recent Comments

■ [We can only hope that the Zetas thin out some of their ranks...](#)
[Read More »](#)

Post Your Comment

[Log in to forums](#) to post a comment.



[A 100 Million Dollar Group ...](#)