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Mexico drug war doesn't stop Americans from moving south of the border

'As safe as Seattle,' says a transplant to Mérida, Mexico, where there is no sign of the violent drug war waging in the north. Expatriates are fast buying and renovating colonial haciendas.



Dan Kames, a retired lawyer from New Orleans, shows the renovation work on his property in Mérida, Mexico. The city of 1 million, on the Yucatán Peninsula, has drawn many American expatriates who say they're unaffected by the nation's violent drug wars.

Juan Ignacio Llana Ugalde

By Sara Miller Llana, Staff Writer / June 4, 2010

Mérida, Mexico

Bill Engle is outside, sweating in work clothes while he oversees renovations to his colonial house in Mérida, Mexico. It sits on a street dubbed "Gringo Gulch," a pretty row of baby blue, violet, and mustard facades where expatriates outnumber Mexicans.

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"It is not the climate," says Mr. Engle, explaining why he moved to the Yucatán Peninsula. "It is the people. It is the most welcoming place."

Americans scared off by violence in Mexico? Not here.

In towns far from the US border such as Mérida, Mexico's drug wars seem like another world. In fact, according to a recent survey by the International Community

Foundation, violence reduced the frequency or duration of trips to Mexico for only 7 percent of American retirees who live or travel frequently to Mexico.

No one knows how many foreign retirees, entrepreneurs, and families relocated to Mérida in recent years, but judging from real estate deals, new members to the English-language library, and observations by locals, it is not a few – nor is it ebbing.

'As safe as Seattle'

"I feel more part of a community here and safer or as safe here as I did in Seattle," says Martha Lindley, a retired chaplain and lawyer who moved here three years ago.

Of 5.25 million Americans living abroad, 1 million are estimated to live south of the border. Some communities, such as San Miguel de Allende (a Heritage Site in central Mexico), seem virtual US suburbs. Mérida is becoming a magnet as transplants rush to buy old mansions and haciendas from the 19th century boom in henequen (a fiber used to make rope).

"I do not feel any violence here," says Dan Karnes, a retired lawyer from New Orleans who moved here last year. He purchased an 18th-century colonial mansion, last used as a warehouse, and on a recent day was overseeing workers digging a pool foundation and laying an oval courtyard. When done, Mr. Karnes will boast an 18,300-square-foot home.

Mérida housing market rebounds with retirees

Mérida became a hot destination five years ago, says Mitch Keenan of Mexico International Real Estate. He's sold homes here for 15 years. While the global recession hurt sales, he says the market is rebounding and sending in more well-heeled retirees.

With America's baby boomers retiring, potential for further growth is huge. The International Community Foundation found that Mexico remains their retirees' No. 1 travel destination. The possible extension of Medicare benefits to Americans who retire abroad could further fuel that.

Ellen Fields and her husband, Jim, run the site Yucatánliving.com and help expatriates settle here. "It is so neighborly," she says. She once left her keys in her door; instead of getting robbed, the keys got returned.

Locals say foreigners blend easily with the city's 1 million residents.

Alvaro Martinez and Sara Lopez, who moved to "Gringo Gulch" 70 years ago, long before it earned its nickname, are one of two Mexican families on the street. "They are good neighbors, there are never any problems," says Mr. Lopez, his arm draped around his wife. "They are moving in all around us."

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