

For some East Bay retirees, Mexico an affordable alternative

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SAVING MONEY SOUTH OF THE BORDER



Retirement boom in Mexico

Couples and singles with Easy Bay ties are finding Mexico an affordable retirement alternative. Cyndi and Doug Gray, left, of Livermore, purchased a beachfront condo in Manzanillo, where they plan to spend part of each year. Brad and Linda Billingsley, center, formerly of Lafayette, moved to Rosarito Beach in 2007. Alameda resident Bob Hansen, far right, shows a photo of the area where he bought a condo in Manzanillo, where he plans to retire.

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. 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's 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 Kiy, 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.

A survey snapshot: 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.

Anxiety fades: A weakening American economy, U.S. State Department travel alerts and worries about the H1N1 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 did in Livermore.

"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.

A 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. It's a very gracious

culture," she said. "You walk down the street here and people say hello to you."

Although Fields isn't quite fluent in Spanish, 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.

Someone else's country: Some retirees may settle in only to find they can't interact with the local residents. "They do the hobby thing and then after about a year they get bored," McEnany said.

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

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. "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 she 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."

