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The Cost of Living in Belize

By Susanne van Lieshout - (0)

Is Belize an expensive country for an expatriate? That question obviously does not have a singular answer. It depends on a number of factors, and with the risk of sounding like a Belizean politician who never gives a straight answer I will try to shed some light on the issue...

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By David Galland, The Casey Report - (0)

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By Roger Gallo - (0)

In the previous articles we discussed several modalities for making money overseas. One subject that was mentioned was a scalping technique with a securities account. Because I received the most email response regarding that subject, I will repeat it here...

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The Cost of Living in Belize

By Susanne van Lieshout / Nov 09 • Categorized as [Living Overseas](#) • [Download Print Friendly PDF](#)



Feeling Good is Easy in Belize

Is Belize an expensive country for an expatriate? That question obviously does not have a singular answer. It depends on a number of factors, and with the risk of sounding like a Belizean politician who never gives a straight answer I will try to shed some light on the issue of the cost of living for expatriates in Belize (all prices in US\$). In no particular order, I would say it depends on the following factors:

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- Where you live: On the islands like San Pedro and Caye Caulker all prices are at least 20% higher than on the mainland.
- Your life style and budget: Being an American diplomat working for Uncle Sam who is willing to pay \$5,000 for your monthly house rental is not the same as being a retired couple with a modest pension. A decent mid-sized house can be rented for one tenth this amount, between \$500 and \$1,000. If you leave your air-conditioning on day and night you'll have a bill of over \$1,000 at the end of the month. We pay around \$125 per month for electricity, using mainly fans and one hour max of AC per day.
- The countries to which you're comparing Belize: The Belize dollar is linked to the US dollar 2:1 and with the high-valued Euro, Europeans find it cheaper than most Americans. For sure Belize is more expensive than its neighboring countries, Mexico and Guatemala.

But let me tell you about the prices I am paying here and you can reach your own conclusion. Tuesdays and Fridays are market days here in Belmopan. Defying the heat, I take my big shopping bag, load it with the fruits and vegetables available – which usually means oranges, grapefruit, pineapples, papayas, water melons, carrots, cucumbers, spinach and tomatoes, and I pay around \$12 – no hassle, no cheating, no bargaining like in some other countries where prices double as soon as they see gringos. Then I go on to the bakery to buy two loaves of brown bread, \$2.25 each, followed by a visit to the meat shop: chicken breast and ground beef for \$3.50 per package. From there I proceed to the supermarket. There are two types of supermarkets: Belizean-owned shops like Brodies, and Chinese supermarkets. I found that Brodies is usually somewhat more expensive though not on all products, but it is clean and air-conditioned. This cannot be said about the Chinese supermarkets, where I witnessed two school girls stepping on a rat's tail last week. I don't know who squealed louder, the girls or the rat. The Chinese seemed unimpressed.

There are rumors that Chinese shopkeepers shut down their freezers at night to save on electricity, which is obviously a disaster for frozen food. I don't know if that is true; we have not been sick here at all, but I do know that they sell medium-sized Head & Shoulders shampoo which has been diluted with water for \$6.25. That said, Chinese supermarkets are indispensable in Belize because they are always open, have a good variety of goods and a high turnover, but cleanliness is definitely not their forte. I shop at both Brodies and the Chinese stores because by now I know what to buy where. Depending on my mood and my wallet, I pay between \$50 and \$100 for my weekly groceries for my family of three, although I usually have to pop in a couple of additional times during the week because I always forget to buy stuff.

Most food items are imported, and for international brands we pay through the nose: Yoplait yoghurt, Loreal shampoo, Tide washing detergent, Lay's chips, Ziplock bags are expensive, but you can also opt for Mennonite yoghurt, White Rain Shampoo, Blanca Nieves washing powder, Marie Sharp's chips and No-Brand bags, and spend half or less. I reckon that around 95% of consumer goods are imported, yet good-value local products include citrus, pineapple, coconut, vegetables, dairy such as ice cream, white cheese and (slightly sour) yoghurt, chicken, sausages, ground beef, and tortillas. You can also get good basic wooden furniture like my beautiful multi-colored mahogany dining table that I got for 125 bucks in the market. In fact I bought most of my furniture and kitchen appliances in Belize, new or second hand, and succeeded pretty well in creating a home in which I feel

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comfortable. The only challenge was to find a good sofa; most are bulky and ugly with horrible big flower patterns from Courts furniture shop. I ended up having one made right here in Belmopan. I downloaded a picture from ikea.com, bought some fabric and 5 days later we were sitting on a pretty good couch for \$420. All in all our move-in has cost us around \$4,500 including all electrical appliances because all those we had were 220 volt and with different plugs, thus not worth bringing over. Americans will not have that problem because Belize uses 110 volts 60 Hz, as they do in the U.S., so your appliances will work fine here.



Notes on Prices in Belize

Some other interesting prices are: Repairing and changing a tire: \$8, color and highlight my hair with a hair cut and a blow dry all together for \$50, a pedicure \$12, 'high-speed' internet (quotation marks intended) costs us \$55 per month, school fee at the semi-international pre-school is \$185 per month and a yard mowing and cleaning is around \$17. I recently had a crown replaced by a renowned dentist in Belize city and paid \$175. For more detailed prices you may want to go to www.belizefirst.com/cost.html

Very importantly, for a beer in a bar we pay \$1.75 D. It's only \$1.50 at happy hour or when ordering ten or more, something we have personally introduced here in Belmopan, which we call the Bucket concept. I am talking about Belikin beer,

the Belizean beer that comes in sturdy 10 oz. dark brown bottles, so heavy that it is impossible to feel if they're full or empty. I did not like its taste in the beginning but I have acquired it by now. So, beer drinkers can easily survive here. Wine lovers will have to dig deep into their pockets, as a simple bottle of wine will easily cost \$15, and I am not even talking about a *good* bottle of wine. Rum, on the other hand, is cheap, the same price as a bottle of wine but for an XXL size bottle of One Barrel, the local rum which has won several awards. What can I say, when in Rome do as the Romans, right?

All in all, I personally find the cost of living here in Belmopan, Belize quite reasonable, but I must say that, while we live well by Belize standards, we still have to watch our spending. I never use my credit card here, the main reason being that our cards have been copied several times here. I only found this out when my bank statements suddenly showed purchases of Apple computers and Nike shoes from Los Angeles and New York which I am sure I never bought. Luckily my bank noticed the suspicious purchases and I was able to recuperate the amounts. I do not recommend credit card use here in Belize and there are ATMs across the country so you may as well use your debit card.

The other reason my credit card stays in my purse is basically that there's not that much opportunity to really spend. I have not bought any clothes, shoes, toys, hand bags, CDs, books, jewelry, movie tickets, make-up or electronic gadgets since I arrived here.

In that respect Belize is savers paradise. No shops, no malls; no temptations. How's that for saving on the cost of living!?

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Taking the Long Way Home: An Unexpected Adventure from Shanghai to Hangzhou

By Tracy Zhang / Nov 09 • Categorized as [Living Overseas](#) • [Download Print Friendly PDF](#)



Boating in Hangzhou

On a self-planned or guided tour of the People's Republic of China, one will run up against the need to visit Hangzhou. Read any guidebook. Ask any Chinese person. Undisputedly, Hangzhou, known for its extravagant natural beauty and thousands of years of development of its tea and silk culture, is simply the most traditionally elegant city in China. Its scenery and natural delights have been praised by the greatest Chinese poets and its landscape lovingly cared for through multiple dynasties, empires and governments. While everyone will tell you that Hangzhou is a "must see" among the cities of China, few will warn against the troubles that can plague you in getting there.

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For those wealthy enough to have their trip planned wholly for them by a foreign or domestic travel service, no difficulties should arise with transportation issues to or from airports anywhere in China. In fact, a well-planned trip into China will never hint at any of the daily life issues that may be faced by regular Chinese people. However, for the budget traveler who wants to go it alone, certain transportation issues, the same ones faced most often by common Chinese, will burst forth front and center.

While a seasoned traveler in the People's Republic of China must be ready for any and all contingencies, must keep a flexible mind and attitude about literally everything, there is always a new wrinkle, a small twist that results in a mental pause of such starkness that it takes a while to get one's mind wrapped around the changed circumstances. However, a recent experience I encountered in bus travel was so unbelievable that it seemed prudent to write it down so travelers less familiar with the PRC could prepare themselves for a potential travel surprise (at best) or hazard (at worst). For, while these events occurred in my experience in only a certain part of southeast China, it is highly likely that such a bus experience is not an isolated practice.

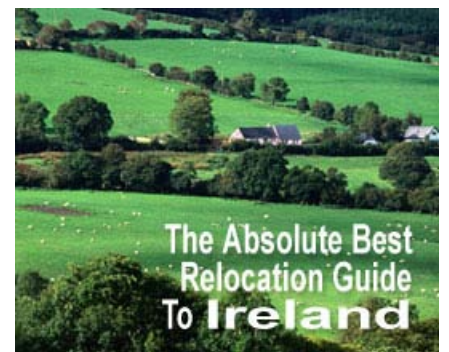
Trading Places

Recently, my elder brother brought two of his friends from the U.S. to visit our home in Hangzhou. Neither of his friends had ever left the U.S., one previously having gotten so far only as Arizona. Traveling to China, for them, was the trip of a lifetime. Although my brother had tried to prepare them for the need to keep an open mind, neither my brother nor I had anticipated we would be "sold off" on our bus trip from Shanghai Pudong Airport to Hangzhou's Wulimen Market, setting a tone for the trip that incited fears and required explanations later of almost every form of transportation we planned to take.

Since tickets to fly from Cleveland to Chicago to Shanghai were far less expensive than those that added an extra leg on to Hangzhou, my brother selected the Shanghai arrival site of Pudong International Airport. Being well-schooled in Chinese cultural norms, the courtesy of meeting my brother and his friends at the site of arrival and escorting them to our home in Hangzhou was de rigeur. I even made an advance recon trip to Shanghai to pre-plan the itinerary we would follow there at the end of their trip prior to the departure at Pudong. My advance planning included identifying a long-distance bus service that would pick us up at Pudong International in Shanghai

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and take us directly to Hangzhou's Wulimen Market, from where we could catch a taxi on to the house.

Their plane arrived on time and everyone was pleased with the large and lovely tour bus that picked us up on the upper arrival level at Pudong's very modern and well-appointed Terminal 2. I had been assured we would go directly from Pudong to Hangzhou, but was surprised there were only 5 people on an 80 seat bus. Nevertheless, we stowed my guests' eight suitcases and carry-ons into the luggage compartments below the bus and boarded. The bus driver told me there was no need to buy a ticket until we reached our destination, which I assumed was Hangzhou.

The bus pulled out to leave Pudong and drove off the airport property, taking the A20 highway toward the direction of Hangzhou. For those not familiar with it, this is about an eight to twelve lane highway in most places full of large container trucks, flat beds, passenger vehicles, small vans, taxis, and large tour buses. The maximum speed is 100 km/hr, but most vehicles are traveling faster. Vehicles not moving at those speeds either are already broken down on the side of the road or on their way to being crushed by the other drivers. The lane markers are a benevolent set of suggestions painted there by authorities, who probably have noticed with no small sense of frustration that no driver in China feels bound by any straight line.

My guests seated themselves comfortably at the back of the big empty bus and chatted with me as they watched the countryside fly by full of sights that seemed to amuse and amaze them. I talked of China and the development of the land and the country, the magnificent beauty of Hangzhou, and the delights that awaited them on their trip. I failed to mention what needed to be mentioned most: the absolute requirement of a sense of humor and commitment to flexibility as one traveled around the area. The congenial atmosphere lasted for about forty minutes, and then ...

Our bus lurched to the right and stopped behind another bus on the right shoulder of the A20's enormous stretch of highway. The one additional passenger at the front jumped up and followed the driver as he exited the bus. I thought she had made arrangements for some unannounced stop peculiar to her own needs and that we would proceed apace soon. My guests and I did not move. Then, quite suddenly, my brother saw our luggage being pulled out of the tour bus and flung on the side of the shoulder of the highway by the bus driver who had climbed down from the bus in front of us. My brother jumped up just as our bus driver leaped back into the tour bus and yelled at us rudely "get off the bus, get off the bus."

Despite my shock and fearing that our luggage was about to be separated from us, I ran to the front of the bus and down the steps to the road. Large trucks and buses flew by. The dirty rickety old blue bus sitting in front of us had, under its multiple layers of mud, distinct markings of having twenty years ago been a long distance passenger bus. It was packed with passengers none of whom looked pleased to see me questioning my bus driver by the side of the road. After much very loud and angry inquiry, all I could actually get out of our driver was "You have to change buses to get to Hangzhou. If you want to go there, buy a ticket now. Eighty-five yuan each."

I told my brother and his guests to grab all their luggage and move it to the smaller blue bus in front of us. As I wasn't even sure of what really was happening, and since I had just paid for the tickets, moving the luggage seemed the prudent thing to do. Recovery of my common sense came just in time as the driver of our new bus gestured that he would leave without us if we didn't hurry. As the blue bus was full of passengers and their luggage was stowed underneath the bus, we had no choice but to drag all our luggage into the already crowded bus. The seven empty seats on this new bus were full of passenger carry-ons and coats. No one seemed inclined to let us sit, so I had to demand people move their own carry-ons elsewhere so we could take advantage of the empty seats. Four obliged and we climbed over our own luggage that now crowded the aisles and the front stairwell to take those seats. I was the last one to sit, an act that occurred less because I willed it and more because the driver merged suddenly into traffic from the shoulder at about 80 km/hr throwing me into my seat.

My anger at all this was palpable. After calming my brother's friends, I conferred via cell phone with friends and learned that we had just been "sold" from one nice bus to a "trader" bus, an act not only uncomfortable and unsafe, but totally illegal. For the first few minutes my righteous indignation knew no bounds, but now that I was committed to the ride home, I called my sister-in-law and told her what happened. She immediately called the tour bus company at Pudong to complain. Oddly enough, her complaints met with a response that made me laugh aloud and restored me to complete faith that I would never grasp how business is done in China.

When my sister-in-law called back, she informed me that the bus company representative couldn't figure out why I was so angry. She said, "We were doing them a favor! Rather than driving them into Hongqiao Airport (Shanghai's domestic airport in the city limits) and letting them wait an hour for the next bus to Hangzhou, we switched them into a bus en route to save them time." It was customer service at its finest! "En route" apparently was the code word for "while risking live and limb at the side of the road." I couldn't stop laughing even though my brother's friends were now traumatized beyond belief!

On the bus, I spoke with some of the other passengers, who assured me that they themselves had never experienced anything so absurd in their lives. They were as shocked as we, but their side of the story was a bit different. They had purchased their tickets at Hongqiao Airport for a straight shot bus ride to Hangzhou. Angry that



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they were sitting at the side of the road for more than fifteen minutes, they began to shout at their bus driver, demanding to know what was going on. The driver's response was as minimalist as the one I got. He told them, "I just work here."

The next morning, settled comfortably in our living room after coffee and breakfast, I attempted to soothe my guests that we would not have any more events of this type. In fact, I called upon a Chinese saying to help them put new perspective on the situation:

小事情不顺利,大事情很顺利

"When little things go wrong, big things will go right"

Although the traffic in general, taxi rides that veered into oncoming traffic, and pedestrian crossings terrorized them throughout the trip, everything else did go smoothly during their next ten days in Hangzhou. However, as time grew near for them to return to Shanghai they had to be reassured repeatedly that we would not be "sold" again on any buses. Luckily, my husband needed to go to Shanghai on business anyway, so he agreed to drive my brother and all the luggage to our hotel, while the rest of us took the train. Luckily, the new trains in China, at least between Hangzhou and Shanghai, are clean, efficient, and not over-crowded. Second class (hard seat or 硬座) is just as comfortable as first class (soft seat or 软座).



Pudong International Airport

One More Time for Old Time's Sake

Our trip around Shanghai was successful, but when time came to see my brother and his guests off at Pudong International I decided, out of curiosity and practical considerations, I would take the tour bus to Hangzhou once more. First, I wanted to see for myself, with a more critical and prepared eye, if this buying and selling of passengers was endemic or if the bus company was serious when it said it was helping us out. Second, my only other choice to get back to Hangzhou was to take the train from one of

Shanghai's train stations. That would have involved a trip from the Pudong airport back to one of the train stations and the distinct possibility that a train ticket would be unavailable. Besides that, no matter what happened, it was cheaper to take the bus.

After my guests had entered the airport's security procedure, I phoned the bus company to notify them I would need a ride. They said they would pick me up at the #28 departures entrance at Terminal 2. By 3:15 pm I was on my way, this time on a clean, large, and even more well-appointed bus carrying only one other passenger. Our route did not vary and, sure enough, 40 minutes later we were nearing Hongqiao Airport. Instead of stopping in the middle of the road to unceremoniously demand my sale, this time the bus exited and headed for the bus parking area at Hongqiao. There I was asked very politely to exit the bus, purchase a ticket from a roaming ticket seller, and board a rickety old bus for Hangzhou, which was full except for about 15 seats.

Slowly, the bus filled almost to capacity and by 4:40 pm we were on the road, again, headed for home. The additional wait at Hongqiao had added more than an hour to our travel time and I began to think the bus company may have been in earnest about wanting to save us time on that first trip. My illusion was short-lived.

Within thirty minutes of leaving the Hongqiao Airport, we had stopped twice to both buy and sell passengers on the side of the highway. During one stop, the shoulder was so thick with buses engaged in buying and selling passengers that they had leaked out into the right hand lane of the superhighway, causing further back ups and confusion. To make matters worse, our driver had clipped the right hand mirror of a petroleum truck, resulting in a case of severe road rage by the truck driver. For almost thirty minutes the two vehicles sped down the highway veering back and forth as the truck driver attempted to force our bus off the road first from the left lanes and then from the right. To describe this high speed chase as dangerous would be an understatement. It was fully worthy of Hollywood's filming for a new version of "Speed" without Sandra Bullock. The last we saw of the truck driver was his face contorted with fury as he attempted to fling a metal pipe through the side window of our bus.

Luckily, we arrived safely back in Hangzhou. But my curiosity was still not satisfied.

Tour Bus Travel Between Shanghai and Hangzhou

Although I know that tour bus travel is big business in any Sino-culture (China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong), I also know that owning the rights to "lines" comes via the agreement of municipalities and their licensing bureaus. After discreet inquiries, I learned there was only one venture allowed to run the line from Pudong International



Guozhuang Park

to Hangzhou. This is a wholly owned government entity run by the Hangzhou Municipality. Those who know more about such matters explained to me that the lines from Pudong and Hongqiao are so busy, lucrative, and important to the tourist trade in Hangzhou that it would be unlikely the city would lease such tour bus lines to a private

company, which could prove even more unreliable or unsafe.

I also learned that the reason this bus line doesn't sell tickets when one boards the large plush tour buses at Pudong is because they would be accused of "bait and switch" should they sell tickets at the point of origin. Instead, they provide a free ride from Pudong to the "hub terminal" at Hongqiao, waiting until a passenger's "presentation" at the actual physical long-distance bus either at Hongqiao or on the highway to sell the tickets to the traveler. In that way, the passenger then has a choice whether or not to buy the ticket and board the bus. Of course, when standing on the side of an eight lane highway with nowhere to go, the concept of "choice" or "free will" is an abstract one only. Oddly enough, this practice has become known as the "sale" of the passenger rather than adopting the more accurate identifier as the "point of sale of the ticket."

Is such activity illegal? Knowledgeable sources here say "yes, absolutely." But they temper their certainty with a concept anyone in any society can readily recognize. They call these "shallow rules." Everyone, it seems, knows the rule. Everyone agrees it is wrong to break it. A "shallow rule" simply defines the illegality of a "defacto reality." And, beyond that, no one much bothers about the rule if they want to get from one place to another. One contact suggested if I was so outraged by being inconvenienced by my "sale" to another bus, that I dial 110 on my cell phone and report my "emergency." "See what happens," he suggested if I wanted to know the meaning of a "shallow rule." Another friend literally laughed in my face, saying "do you really think you are the first person this has ever happened to?" Apparently, the practice is not new.

Can You Game the System?

If one is a seasoned traveler in China and suitably forewarned of this type of activity, weathering a bus ride of this sort will rank low on the list of indignities just waiting to be suffered. In fact, one might even view the tour bus waiting at Pudong as an opportunity to reduce costs.

Unlike Pudong, which is 48 kilometers (29 miles) from downtown Shanghai, Hongqiao International Airport is situated in the western outskirts of Shanghai, about 13 kilometers (8 miles) from downtown area. Taking the free ride on the tour bus from Pudong International Airport to Hongqiao Airport positions one for a cheap and easy taxi ride to Shanghai's main train station. Or, from Hongqiao, you can take the No. 941 bus to the Shanghai South Train station (about 17 stops). Once at the train station, with luck, one can pick up a ticket to Hangzhou. Or, once at Hongqiao, one can grab a cab into Shanghai's center city for a visit to China's shopping and financial capital.

An even easier way into Shanghai's center city, of course, is to take the shuttle (currently costing RMB22 or USD 3.25) from Pudong's International Airport to Jing'an Temple downtown and move on from there to a train station or to your Shanghai location.

Is it all worth it?

No matter the difficulty with travel from Shanghai's Pudong International Airport, don't let anything put you off from visiting Hangzhou. This former capital of China during the Southern Song Dynasty has much to recommend it. Both historically and culturally, Hangzhou truly is a "must see" on any China travel itinerary.

About the Author: Tracy Zhang recently retired and now spends her time with friends and family in China and around the U.S. She's also busy downsizing and helping others do the same. Visit her shop at charliebear.etsy.com to check out her patterns, e-books, and vintage items.

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Living in Thailand is like Saturday Night Anywhere

By Bart Walters / Nov 09 • Categorized as [Living Overseas](#) • [Download Print Friendly PDF](#)



Saturday Night Anywhere

It made my girlfriend's evening when I called and told her we should go out for dinner. It's her last work day of the week and some Saturday night seafood sounded good.

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We live walking distance from a little fishing village on the Gulf of Thailand called Ban Ampur. There are a cluster of waterfront seafood restaurants that all have one thing in common. The food you eat in them comes from boats

bobbing in the water right in front of you. "Fresh" is the main ingredient in Thai food.

In Thailand, where restaurants outnumber people, deciding where to eat can be challenging. Most of these places are all the same business model; Chinese family-style. The only way to separate them is to discern the specialties of the house. You end up choosing a place to eat based on a favorite dish that one place makes better than all the rest. On this night we were on the hunt for our favorite, Black Pepper Crab.

Good Black Pepper Crab means Si Nuan (pronounced see-noo-wan), a mega-restaurant that can easily hold 500 people. Saturday night at Si Nuan means being in loud, noisy, crowded and busy Thai seafood joint with battalion-size families marching in and setting up camp.

We drank most of a bottle of wine at home before venturing down the beach. You really have to prepare yourself for the sensory assault you're walking into. It's like being in a huge aquarium full of aggressive fish. I find it best to give in, plant myself right in the middle and hit "record".

Si Nuan is a concrete and tile megalith; a faded green, two-storey colonial style building with terracotta tiles covering the over-sized roof. The inner dining room can host 300 people at long picnic-style tables seating parties of 10 to 20 each. An outer dining room on a wide covered porch seats another 100 or so at big round tables. Recently they've added open-air seating on the grass and sand that goes all the way down to the water.

All the seafood is displayed in live tanks and concrete holding pens full of circulating water and all manner of sea creatures. One would have to be a marine biologist to identify all the species available for consumption. My girlfriend and I wandered up and down the display like we were at Sea World.

Finally we settled on sitting outside under the stars. We had an excellent view of the little harbor and the biggest outdoor sports screen I've ever seen showing Rafael Nadal whipping the daylights out of someone at the French Open. There must have been 100 people congregating around the concrete tables scattered over the sand and grass.

Suddenly, my Thai Princess put her nose to the wind and declared, "Tilac, foon toc". Loosely translated; "Sweetheart, it's going to rain". In an uncharacteristic "take-charge" move, she transported us inside before we ordered. We captured one of the only small tables in a strategic location with a waiter that understood the meaning of the word "tip".

Within in minutes we were enjoying frosty beers and had food on the way. I praised my girl for her tactical restaurant prowess and she expressed her admiration for the smooth 100 baht teaser slipped to our waiter.

As forecast, the sky ripped open and the restaurant became smaller by about a third. Rain-soaked families

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scrambled to move food, shoes, grandmothers and baby strollers under the giant hat-shaped tile roof. Service and consumption resumed within 3 minutes. Dislocated tribes soon put down roots again and restarted their respective parties. We were way ahead of them thanks to my girlfriend ...the weather girl.

Equally predictable was the seating of a large family directly across from us at a table for 15 or so people. They arrived in groups of three and four, some wet from being seated outside and some just arriving with dripping umbrellas. Immediately visible was a classic character at most Chinese-Thai family get-togethers; The Drunken Director.

This forty-something Thai woman, wore the telltale puffy "birdhouse" of hair favored by upper-middle class ladies. Stomping flat-footed up to the head of the table with a tumbler full of Johnny Walker Red and ice, she immediately began barking orders to waiters, rearranging the seating and dragging chairs from other tables. All this she did without her glass ever once touching the table.

After they'd all been seated, then rearranged by The Drunken Director, then seated again, we could begin to delineate who was who in this ever-so-typical Thai family. The Drunken Director was seated near the head of the table by her husband; another common feature of the Thai entourage ... "The-Quiet-Guy-Who-Pays". Dressed from head to toe in Lacoste golf clothes and sporting a really sweet Omega watch, this guy didn't have a hair out of place. He thoughtfully listened, drank beer and checked his phone every ten minutes. He did a good job of pretending to listen to his whisky swilling wife pontificating to her younger twin sisters seated to her right. They openly ignored her, carrying on a conversation with each other instead of listening. The Quiet-Guy-Who-Pays was jealous of their immunity, I could tell.

Seated to the quiet guy's left was no one. A space left empty by a teenage son who was busy outside on the terrace in an animated private conversation with someone on his pink cell phone. His shirt was also hot pink as were his old-school Converse high-tops. His skin tight black jeans matched his eyeliner. My girlfriend dubbed him "The Pink Panther". By the time he sashayed in and took his place at the table, the family was well into its first course. I could see that for him, it didn't matter if all the shrimp were eaten ... he was a vegetarian. He was the only person the Quiet-Guy-Who-Pays talked to all night.

Watching one of these big families consume food in large quantities can be a gruesome sight. The Drunken Director didn't have the patience to wait for food to be passed, so she got up and walked around the table, drink in hand, to reach over everyone and grab handfuls of food. She'd stand there chewing with her mouth open and talking at the same time. The others ignored her. They were busy eating, or talking or on their phones, or smoking, or all of the above. Big plates of food hit the table and carcasses came out. Depleted Heineken bottles congregated on the metal drink cart displayed like battlefield trophies. This garish theater of gluttony was repeated at every table in my line of sight.

Breaking the spell of this carnivorous carnival was the only real child of the bunch and obviously the baby of the family. She was a cute little pig-tailed muffin, with pink silk ribbons in her hair and a "Hello Kitty" T-shirt to match her stylish older brother. However, she didn't turn to The Pink Panther when the 4 Pepsis she consumed started her doing the "pee-pee dance".

It was her older, university-age, brother with the boy-band hair and two cell phones that came to her rescue. In all, he patiently escorted baby sister to the little girl's room once for every cola consumed. He entertained the squirmy toddler throughout the entire evening; the consummate big brother.

The table was a beehive of activity. People getting up and sitting down; other groups joining for a drink and a nibble; the action never stopped. One thing remained constant; the cotton-haired old lady anchoring the far corner. Her hair was like a long-bristled brush, snow white and growing straight up in kind of an exaggerated flat-top. She wore a blue Chinese Nankeen print garment that could best be described as a housecoat. The twins, I'm assuming her daughters, took up positions on each side of her. They deftly cracked crabs, shelled shrimp and deboned fish, keeping the old lady's plate piled high and beer glass full.

With a maelstrom swirling around her, the elderly elf steadily and deliberately devoured an alarming amount of sea harvest. She only stopped to sit back and have shells and bones taken away. Once a fresh plate was in front of her, she picked up her utensils and went to work. She wasted no energy talking. She had come to eat.

After two hours of full-contact consumption, the Quiet-Guy-Who-Pays summoned the waiter and produced his Platinum Card. The signal was sent out table-wide that the party was over ... at least the free part anyway. Members began to peel off every few minutes, each walking by Quiet-Guy-Who-Pays and acknowledging him with a touch on the shoulder or the passing sniff of a Thai kiss from the younger girls.

Boy Band Brother appeared to have a hot date and excused himself, ear to phone. The Pink Panther was back outside, rejoining his private conversation, twirling car keys around his finger. Apparently he had somewhere to be as well.

The Drunken Director was already in the car passed out on the passenger seat. The twins wrestled Old Cotton Top

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away from the table and into to the backseat. The sugar-fueled pig-tailed princess leapt into the car and wiggled on her sleeping mother's lap.

Behind the wheel, Quiet Guy ensured all members were on board and appropriately buckled in, and then slowly rolled out of the parking lot, stopping briefly to tip the car attendant 50 Baht. The big silver sedan was riding low; as full as their bellies.

It could have been Saturday night anywhere.

About the Author: Bart Walters is a retired advertising executive from Orlando, Florida. He is now a part-time real estate developer celebrating his 10th year in Thailand. Bart lived several years in Bangkok, spent 3 years on the island of Phuket and now resides in Ban Amphur on Thailand's eastern seaboard.

[Editor's note: I have corresponded with many fantastic people during my time with Escape Artist but Bart Walters is by far one of the most entertaining and genuine people I have had the pleasure to be in contact with. Bart writes about life in Thailand and permits me to use his work in exchange for a link back to the charity website that raises money for an orphanage in Thailand. Please take a moment to visit the site, donate if you can and help support a good cause. Please go to www.care4kids.info Thank you]

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If You Thought the Housing Meltdown Was Bad...

By Doug Hornig, Casey Research / Nov 09 • Categorized as [International Real Estate](#) • [Download Print Friendly PDF](#)



Commercial Real Estate Meltdown

...wait until you see what's in the cards for commercial real estate.

That's right, the next train wreck will be in commercial real estate. Couldn't be worse than last year's residential market crash? That remains to be seen. But it's coming soon, probably as early as the second quarter of next year, and there's nothing that can prevent it. The government will intervene, trying desperately to delay the day of reckoning, and may even succeed. For a while. But make no mistake about it, that train is going off the tracks no matter what.

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Every part of the sector – from multifamily apartment buildings to retail shopping centers, suburban office buildings, industrial facilities, and hotels – has accumulated a huge amount of defaulted or nonperforming paper. It's an impossible, swaying

structure that cannot long stand.

Just ask Andy Miller.

Andy is one of the most knowledgeable people around when it comes to commercial real estate. Co-founder of the Miller Fishman Group of Denver, he has spent twenty years buying and developing apartment communities, shopping centers, office buildings, and warehouses throughout the country. He's also worked extensively – especially lately – with asset managers and special servicers (those who handle commercial mortgage-backed securities, or CMBS) from insurance companies, conduits, and the biggest banks in the U.S., advising them on default scenarios, helping them develop realistic pricing structures, and making hold or sell recommendations.

It isn't easy. Commercial real estate sales are off a staggering 82% in 2009, compared with 2008, and last year was worse than '07. No one is selling at depressed prices, but it hardly matters as there are no buyers, either because they're afraid of the market or can't meet more stringent loan requirements. Two years ago, the value of all commercial real estate in the U.S. was about \$6.5 trillion. Against that was laid \$3-3.5 trillion in loans. The latter figure hasn't changed much. But the former has sunk like a bar of lead in the lake, so that now between half and two-thirds of those loans will have to be written down, Andy estimates.

"If the banks had to take that hit all at once, there wouldn't be any banks," he says.

And it's actually worse than that. As even average citizens became aware during the subprime meltdown, loans in recent years were bundled into exotic financial vehicles that could be sold and resold, a class generically known as *conduits*. These commercial mortgage-backed securities, while less well known than their cousins built upon home loans, are nonetheless ubiquitous.

Three guesses who were among the significant buyers of CMBS. If you said banks, banks, and more banks, you got it. Thus these folks are sitting not only on their own malperforming loans, but on a whole lot of everyone else's toxic junk, too.

This is how bad conduits are: A 3% default rate last year jumped to 6% in 2009 and is expected to double again, to 12%, in 2010. An entity that takes a 12% hit to its portfolio – and this includes countless banks, pension and annuity

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funds, international institutional investors, and others – is in deep, deep trouble.

The real tsunami is coming, probably in the second quarter of 2010, Andy estimates. Because that's when banks will have to start preparing for the wave of mortgages that were written near the market top and are maturing in 2011-12. Unlike home loans, commercial loans tend to be relatively short-term in nature (average 5-7 years), because – outside of apartment building loans backed by Fannie or Freddie – there are no government programs to subsidize longer-term ones. These guys mature in bunches.

According to a recent Deutsche Bank presentation, the delinquency rate on commercial loans as of the end of 2Q09 was greater than 4%. Of these, they expect that north of 70% will not qualify for refinancing. Imagine what will happen to the estimated \$2 trillion in commercial mortgages that mature between now and 2013.

And even that is not the end of it. There's a second huge wave on the way in 2015-16.

Problem is, instead of trying to meet this inevitable challenge head on, asset managers have decided to believe in such phantoms as the tooth fairy, honesty at the Fed, and an economic turnaround powerful enough to bail them all out. De Nile is not just a river in Egypt.

To be fair, it's difficult to envision what an intelligent, aggressive response would look like, given the breadth and depth of the crisis, and the lack of resources available to deal with it. Miller recently met with a group of asset managers from a number of different, prominent banks. They reported that they're completely overwhelmed and can't even begin to cope with the sheer volume of problem loans on their calendar. It's so bad that they're *now* dealing with some borrowers who haven't paid a cent in a year and a half.

What do you do if, as Andy thinks is the case, 85-90% of the entire commercial real estate market is under water relative to its financing? What happens to a property when its value drops way below the loan, a seller can't get enough money to get out, a buyer can't raise enough money to get in, and the bank can't afford to foreclose? Simple. It just sits there, carried along on the bank's books at some inflated "mark to fantasy" price that makes the institution's balance sheet look passable. The industry even has a catchphrase for the situation: "A rolling loan gathers no moss."

In the case of a retail store, a bankrupt tenant walks away. Andy looked at just the part of Phoenix where his firm does business and found 90 vacant big box stores, with an aggregate floor space of 8 million square feet. If Christmas season is as lackluster as cash-strapped consumers are likely to make it, there will be many others to follow.

The hotel business is terrible. Overbuilding based upon travelers who went into debt to finance lavish vacations is taking its toll on tourist destinations. At the same time, business travel has seriously contracted. Flights into Las Vegas, which caters to both, have been slashed so much that even if every seat on every remaining flight were filled and visitors stayed for an average number of days, the hotels still couldn't break even. In industry parlance, banks are now engaged in "extend and pretend," i.e., giving hotels three- to six-month loan extensions in the hope that things will somehow improve in the near future.

Office space is doing okay in central business districts, but not faring well elsewhere. Some estimates tab the national office vacancy rate at over 16.5%, compared with 12.6% in January 2008. It exceeds 20% in parts of Atlanta and San Diego, and in many places in between.

Multifamily apartment buildings – and the very creaky Fannie and Freddie are carrying a load of them – may be the next to topple. As values deteriorate and landlords are faced with loans coming due, there is no incentive to fix whatever goes wrong. If, for example, you have a \$10 million loan maturing in two years, and the property value has declined to \$6 million, why would you spend half a million to fix leaky roofs? The question answers itself. Yet, as capital spending needs are not attended to, the apartments deteriorate. Which leads to working-class tenants replaced by meth labs. Which leads to even lower property values. And so on. In the end, when the banks are forced to take possession, they will be left with either expensive repair jobs, or the cost of demolition and a total write-off.

As the overall commercial real estate crisis escalates, the banks will do the same thing they did last year: run to the government, palms outstretched.

How will Washington respond? Good question. On the one hand, further bailouts will further infuriate the public. But on the other, the political sentiment will be that allowing the banks to fail will have even more dire consequences.

The Fed has already tried to let some of the relentlessly building pressure out of the balloon through TALF (Term Asset-Backed Securities Loan Facility). But that hasn't worked, because TALF only backs the most senior, creditworthy bonds in a CMBS pool. Those aren't the problem. The problem is the junior notes no one wants.

In order to increase market liquidity and get conduits moving again, the government will likely be forced to create a



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guarantee program similar to the FHA, Miller thinks, whereby short-term money (on the order of 5-7 years) is made available. Will that just push our problems five to seven years down the road? Quite possibly. But what is being purchased is *time*, the only thing left to buy. The hope, of course, is that it's *enough* time – for the real estate market to stabilize, prices to return to more “normal” levels, and the world to turn all hunky dory.

Rock, meet hard place. Let all the troubled banks fail, and the consequences will range from some excruciating but short-term pain, to a plunge into full-bore depression. Prop them up with yet more newly printed fiat money, and anything from high to hyperinflation will inevitably result, along with the possibility of extending the problem well into the next decade.

Both are frightening prospects. We don't want either, but realistically, we're going to get one or the other. Let's be clear, it won't be the end of the world. However, it will be the end of the world as we know it. That makes it imperative to prepare for the new one that's coming.

The editors of [The Casey Report](#), supported by real estate pro Andy Miller, have been warning of the coming commercial real estate debacle since September 2008. This one's rather easy to time – because they know when the loans will come due. And as subscribers can testify, accurately predicting big trends is the forte of Doug Casey and his expert team. To learn how you can profit from making the trend your friend, [click here](#).

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How to Blow Your \$150,000 Budget on Dream Homes Abroad

By Susan Beverley / Nov 09 • Categorized as International Real Estate • Download Print Friendly PDF



Dream Homes Overseas for less than \$150,000

This is the first of a 4 part series detailing international real estate around the globe that we have found at bargain basement prices. Next week we will be listing properties in the \$100,000 budget range. The week after those priced at \$75,000 and the final week properties that are selling for an amazing \$50,000 or less!

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Our criteria was to find properties that are ready to move in to, or require little in the way of

renovation to make them habitable. We have not included lots and only listed timeshare or fractional ownership where we thought it was a particularly good deal.

Read on

Never has there been more incentive to realize what is for many people, a long held dream of living abroad. The economy back home is hardly inspiring, the jobs market is lackluster, the cost of living isn't cheap and yet the quality of life is far from adequate for many people. If you share these thoughts and feelings and you'd really like to explore your options elsewhere in the world, we've taken a trip around the world's real estate markets with a theoretical \$150,000 budget to see what you could exchange your current home and lifestyle for in some fabulous settings overseas.

Whether you dream of learning a foreign language and perhaps moving to live in Europe in France or maybe Italy, we have homes that might suit you. If on the other hand you're just interested in securing a holiday home for your family that you can use whilst you're still in full time employment back home, we've found some real gems in Chile or Mexico perhaps. And for those who are maybe more adventurous, who fancy a challenge of turning a real estate wreck into a dream property for profit, we've got investment ideas aplenty.

If you have a dream of escaping overseas – even if it's just a dream that gets you through a hard working week rather than one you ever plan on making come to fruition – here for your delectation are some real estate samples for a budget of just \$150,000.

Note: property details including prices are based on those listed by the vendors and agents cited, and exchange rates are based on those on the 5th of November 2009.

Stunning Homes in Asia for \$150,000

Did you know that Asia is home to among the highest paid expats in the world according to the latest findings from a global survey of expatriates by HSBC International Bank? Now that's a reason to consider relocating to the likes of Singapore, China, India or Malaysia! Or a reason to consider Thailand as an alternative is the wealth of tourism based demand that there is in this nation. If you're looking for an investment property abroad, Thailand is an exceptional choice – what's more, if you'd prefer to *move* abroad you could potentially start your own tourism facing business if you relocated to Thailand.

There's a development of condominiums that might be perfect, it's located on a hillside with fabulous sea views overlooking the gentle waters of the Andaman Sea at Kata Bay. The development consists of 150 units in total,

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comprising 48 cozy one-bed studios and 102 two-bed apartments. Apartment sizes range from 55 to 105 square meters and they have all been designed to be functional and modern, featuring elegant modern bathrooms and ample sized balconies. The open plan living and kitchen area is tastefully furnished, whilst floor to ceiling sliding doors afford the best possible views to the sea beyond.

On-site there's a well-equipped fitness centre, communal pool and pool bar as well as a holistic spa. There is shuttle transportation provided free of charge between the residence, the beach and the nearby shopping centre. The complete condominium project is designed with the comfort, safety and wellbeing of the whole family in mind and offers 24 hour on-site security. A professional and experienced property management company will provide administration and management services to the residences so it couldn't actually be easier if you wanted to invest your money into this development and let it out for profit from the tourism market. Prices range from \$84,842 to \$352,536 so you could certainly find something for your \$150,000 budget.

Elsewhere in Asia there's a stunning, brand new villa for sale in Denpasar which is near Bali in Indonesia. The property is on the market for \$134,103 – or, if you're willing to stretch your budget to \$162,415 you can have the property with an additional piece on land on which will be constructed a swimming pool. The house has beautiful marble floors and consists of 4 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, a spacious living room with open kitchen, balcony and terrace. The views from the property are unobstructed across rice terraces – a beautiful home a million miles away from your current life!

What Will \$150,000 Buy You in Africa?

Your property dollars can stretch a very long way in Africa, but you have to decide which stunning nation you want to live in. If you fancy the exotic appeal of Morocco for example, you can purchase an apartment at the Paradise Golf and Beach Resort in Tangier. 1 bed, 1 bathroom properties start from \$126,471 and for that you'll buy yourself a fantastic holiday home in year round sunshine on a four star development. The development features swimming pools, landscaped gardens, onsite cafes, bars, restaurants and even a supermarket. Your property will be within a gated and secure community that also features a 4 star hotel, with a water sports centre. Finally, an 18 hole golf course is to be integrated into the development and it is literally walking distance to stunning beaches.

If you would like a similar quality development but in an alternative location, what about a beachfront apartment for sale on the Red Sea Riviera in Egypt? The development is called Cape Citadel and it comprises of fully furnished studios, apartments, chalets and semi-detached villas and unfurnished detached villas. Each property enjoys a sea view and the development is on the shores of one of the world's best diving areas. The development's location is further enhanced by its dramatic backdrop of rock-faced mountains that guard the interior Nile Valley from the sea. In terms of the features of this 5-Star Resort, they consist of a private beach, a 28 berth marina and the residents of all properties have unrestricted access to the amenities at the onsite Citadel Azur Hotel which include restaurants, bars as well as a range of entertainment and wellness facilities. Prices start from \$150,000...

If you perhaps prefer a permanent home in Africa, what about South Africa where \$128,672 of your budget will buy you a spacious, detached 3 bedroom family home in Aston Bay on the Eastern Cape. This house is immaculate, modern, it has 2 garages, landscaped gardens and is in an elevated position with great views over the surrounding environment. This is an incredibly well priced property in a great location in South Africa.

Bargain Hunting in North America on \$150,000

For \$142,419 you could purchase your family a retreat in Quebec, Canada. There's a stunning and spacious modern cabin style home for sale on the edge of beautiful woodland in Tadoussac. The property's location is described as being close to the sea, the forest, a golf course, Saguenay fjord, sea mammals, dunes and beautiful beaches. The property itself is gorgeous and ready to move in to. It was built in 1993 then extended in 1996 and has fabulous cathedral roofing. There's a dining room, fitted kitchen, living room with large windows, bathroom, shower and toilet, and on the 1st floor there are 4 bedrooms, 2 walk in closets, a balcony and a bathroom. The basement has been converted into useable space and the property has extensive wooden decks, fruit trees and outbuildings. A perfect home from home or hideaway retreat!

If you prefer a warmer setting then head south to Mexico instead and perhaps choose an apartment at the Tulum White residential estate which consists of 16 villas and 12 apartments featuring floor to ceiling glass windows overlooking 30,000 square feet of spectacularly landscaped tropical gardens. These feature waterfalls, local flora and a communal swimming pool that provides a welcome respite from the intense heat of the Yucatan Peninsula sun. This development is just minutes from one of the most beautiful beaches in the world and apartments start from \$115,000.

Getting More for Your \$150,000 in South America

If you head further south still, you will find you can get even more bang for your real estate buck. In southern Chile you can buy the most stunning property relatively close to downtown Puerto Varas. This extremely modern looking home features 4 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms and has galleried bedrooms with circular windows. The bedrooms also



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overlook the stunning sitting room that has massive picture glass windows and a ceiling that reaches up to the full height of the home. Featuring masses of bare timber, this stunning home really has to be seen to be believed, and it's only on the market for a mere \$143,609!

In Argentina a similar budget will get you an equally fabulous home but in a far more residential setting. In Tigre in the Northern Suburbs of Buenos Aires almost on the banks of the river you can buy a spectacular Mediterranean style villa, fully furnished for \$130,000. The home has 3 bedrooms, it is incredibly light and spacious, it has balconies and terraces, a fabulous garden and comes with its own river pier and moorings. It truly is an incredible family home.

European Properties for Sale for \$150,000

In France in the region of Brittany in the North, there is a fabulous project available for those looking to turn their hand to property restoration. You can buy a three bedroom farm house for sale that comes complete with land and many outbuildings such as stables, and turn the whole lot into a large family home, or even a business such as a bed and breakfast. The property is in the village of Plumaugat and the main residence is perfectly habitable as it is, but because there is so much scope for improvement and also further development with the stone outbuildings, this is certainly real estate that someone looking for project would choose. The asking price is \$155,499 – but I'm sure there's room for negotiation!

If you perhaps prefer a sunnier destination then what about the Calabria region of Italy where for \$148,843 you can buy the most charming detached villa property with incredible views across the Gulf of Policastro. Set in the town of San Nicola Arcella, this residence is ideal as a holiday home, a holiday rental property or even a retirement home in Italy. It is in pristine condition, comes with fabulous landscaped gardens and features 3 bedrooms, spacious living areas and plenty of terraced outdoor space. This is a fabulous buy for your budget.

Can You Buy a New Home in Australia for \$150,000?

Rather than heading for mainland Australia, why not look to New Zealand where your dollars will buy you much more real estate – in Auckland for example you can purchase a straight investment property. It is a fully managed apartment that's already let so it even comes with guaranteed rental returns. The apartment is a studio with 1 bathroom, it's in a central location and is fully managed as stated. It's on the market for \$92,851 – so well under your budget – and what's more, it's a hands off investment opportunity.

If you'd like to move to New Zealand then how about a very tidy 3 bedroom character home in Invercargill? In need of modernization, this detached family home is however, very good value for money. On the market at \$135,966 the property is in a prime location close to all amenities and employment opportunities, and it comes with a detached garage – that can be used for extra storage – as well as extensive gardens.

Finally, in Australia itself, your \$150,000 won't stretch very far at all – but we have managed to find you a small, detached, recently renovated family home in Cummins – which is a town on Eyre Peninsula in South Australia about 50 miles from Port Lincoln. The home is immaculate inside and it has a large back yard that has been completely untouched as yet. You can get your hands on this for \$149,819. And that concludes our tour of the world's real estate market on a budget of just \$150,000!

For details on the properties mentioned in this article [subscribe to the Expat Daily News Newsletter](#) – check the list titled International Real Estate for Less than \$150,000. Subscription is free, it is easy to unsubscribe and we do not spam or sell email addresses to third parties.

[Check back next week to see what you can buy for less than \\$100,000](#)

About the author: Susan Beverley is a writer and editor for Escape From America Magazine and also writes for and maintains [Expat Daily News](#) – the expat news blog for EscapeArtist.com. She has traveled extensively before becoming an expat herself for the last five years having found a place to call home in South America. She understands the concerns, needs and difficulties that expats face from first-hand experience and is dedicated to supporting and encouraging anyone who is looking for a new nation to call home.

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Real Estate Options for Retiree's : A Private Gated Community or Not?

By Christina Stobbs / Nov 09 • Categorized as Overseas Retirement • Download Print Friendly PDF



Is a Gated Community Right for You?

Congratulations! You are ready to move forward and purchase your dream retirement home. You have decided on your dream location, be it a tranquil island in the South Pacific, a small idyllic beach town on Nayarit coast of Mexico, or a bustling colonial city in Panama. What next?

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Location, of course! Before moving forward with your property search, ask yourself how you

picture your daily life once you are settled into your new home and community of your choice. Begin by visualizing your ideal lifestyle and asking yourself what makes you happy!

Does your vision include a private residence located directly on the beach, where you can fall asleep each night to the sound of waves lapping on the shore? Is it a more affordable modest home located in a mixed community where you will be immersed in the culture and a myriad of exciting new experiences? Or a condominium with a large communal swimming pool, located within easy walking distance to the beach? Or perhaps your vision is of a worry free, single family residence, town home or condominium located in a private and idyllic gated community, resembling a picture perfect postcard?

For many of us, the dream is to own a home on the beach, but the reality is that this is not in the realm of most of our budgets, especially if this is to be a second home. A more affordable alternative worth considering is a condominium located on the beach. However, beach locales can be noisy, especially during the tourist season. If you are seeking tranquility, a residence in a gated community may be a more suitable choice. On the other hand if you are not a beach person, a place in the heart of the community may be a better choice for you.

Where to start? Prepare a list of your needs and preferences. Include everything that is important to you; absolutely everything that comes to mind, including what you cannot live with. Is your budget realistic? Do you intend to live in your home year round, or for just part of the year? Is your dream home a single family residence, town home or condominium? Is it located on, or near the beach? Is it located in a local colourfully mixed, family friendly community where you may be the only expatriate on the block; or in a safe and secure community geared towards retirees, populated with fellow expatriates who speak your language, share your beliefs, and values thereby greatly simplifying the process of settling in? Before moving forward to make one of the most important decisions you will make in your lifetime consider whether you would prefer to live in a private gated community, or not.

Gated Communities -The Perfect Choice?

A gated community is defined as a subdivision or a residential community, which is typically enclosed by a closed perimeter of walls and fences. The entrances are usually staffed by security guards and access into these idyllic gated communities is restricted to residents and their authorized guests.

Gated communities are often set back in tranquil resort-like areas, with less traffic, making for peaceful living conditions. They are usually developed by reputable large companies offering a new construction, built to high standards with high end finishing's, but not always. They often offer a new construction guarantee providing buyers with peace of mind, but so do new homes in non-gated communities. Do your research, ask for references and check them!

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There are modest gated communities offering some great recreational facilities, usually a common swimming pool, a BBQ and picnic area. There are large gated communities usually with small residential streets; various recreational amenities, social activities, and sometimes even shops and grocery stores. There are some *very exclusive* gated communities adorned with multi-million dollar mansions, golf courses and marinas.

Gated communities are popular because they offer home owners an instant sense of community. There is a sense of family and a shared camaraderie with fellow expatriates and retirees from all over the world who share a common interest, forming a great base for friendships.

The grounds of the gated communities are usually well kept, and the surrounding homes of the same calibre as yours. They offer a sense of security as entrances are usually either staffed or offer secure access.

Gated communities are typically managed by an administrator or property management company in order to maintain the common areas and insure standards set for the community are upheld. The community pool, exterior of the building, common areas and grounds, are maintained by staff, providing home owners with the freedom to enjoy life. The cost of the annual upkeep is shared amongst home owners, who enjoy all the conveniences of a vacation lifestyle including some great recreational facilities without the headache of pool and grounds maintenance.

When the urge to explore the world strikes you, living in a gated community leaves you free to pack your bags and explore to your heart's content, with minimal concerns about property management during your absence. But what will you do if the maintenance and upkeep of your dream community are not up to par?

Gated Communities - The Controversy

Large gated communities are really "Lifestyle Communities" located within communities and it may be possible for residents to stay within the community for most of their day-to-day activities, and therein lays the controversy.

Whether you love them or hate them, gated communities conjure up images of expatriates living in their own little world behind a barrier shielding them from the realities of the local environment.

Opponents charge that gated communities are fundamentally anti-egalitarian and all about keeping undesirables out. The gates are opened only for the privileged. Gated communities are for affluent expatriates who hide behind their palace walls, and refuse to mingle with lower socio economic classes, or the local people. Residents are missing out on the true experiences of living in another country. The gates create a fortress mentality, encouraging residents to exclude non residents from their lives and concerns, which stratifies and separates those coming into a new culture. The new immigrants rarely assimilate into the community unless they live among the locals and learn to "fit in."

Not so say the proponents. Expatriates and retirees love gated communities for the conveniences, and the sense of security and community they provide. In fact, some of us choose to live in gated communities in our home country, for the very same reasons. Why not enjoy the best of both worlds? Who would not choose to live in a clean, safe community, free of litter, graffiti and crime, set in an idyllic tranquil area, free of traffic, touts and undesirables? When residents of gated communities want to immerse themselves in culture they can head out to town.

Is a Gated Community Right for You?

The statement that gated communities do not offer much local culture is not always true. Your cultural experience depends on a lot of things, including the gated community you choose. Gated communities are frequently staffed by the local people who are responsible for the maintenance, cleaning and administration of your community. Increasingly, today, you will find that in some gated communities "the local people" are your neighbours. In some gated communities there are more local owners than expatriate owners. The local people choose to live in gated communities for the same reasons we do; a sense of security, easy friendship, great recreational facilities and convenience!

Gated communities often have more restrictions than non gated community complexes, so you need to consider whether you can live with the very restrictions that offer gated community homeowners a more appealing and tranquil lifestyle, such as no or rentals, limited guest access to amenities, nuisance bylaws or the lack thereof.

Do you intend to live in your home year round, or for just part of the year? If you intend to live in your home for just part of the year, you may wish rent out your home for additional income when you are not in residence. In this case it would be wise to focus your search on a home located as close to the beach as you can afford, as the closer to the beach you are, the easier it will be for you to rent out your property. This probably means that a condominium, town home, or single family residence in a non-gated community a good choice for you.

If you do not intend to rent out your home, gated communities hold great appeal in that the structure in place offers homeowners a great sense of security. The regulations in place keep tenants under control, and other home owners are always nearby who will advise administration immediately if there are violations in rules or anything

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untoward. Your neighbours are fellow owners and therefore they watch out for you. If conflicts arise between home owners, administration is there to assist with their resolution.

Or Not?

If you have always lived in a single family residence in a non-gated community and are dreaming about a condominium in a worry free gated community relieved of the drudgery of pool and grounds maintenance and other associated problems you need to consider your needs and preferences.

For one, decisions that that you may not agree with are made by a Board of Directors comprised of members of the Home Owners Association. Restrictions that you may or may not agree with are often in place or open to revision at any time. If you envision yours as a colourful tropical home, adorned with turrets and shocking hot pink doors – Sorry it is not going to happen. BBQs on your patio may, or may not be permitted. You hope to bring Rover along, and while most communities accept pets these days, they often have restrictions on the size, number, and types of pets permitted.

Another consideration is how important it is to you to integrate yourself in the culture of your chosen country. Living in a gated community in most cases, means less involvement with the local people. Of course, you can still immerse yourself in the culture through community involvement, it just takes more effort.

The Rewards and Challenges of Living in a Non-Gated Community

We chose to buy a single family dwelling in a non-gated community, and I believe that we are living a richer cultural experience because of it. We are friends with the mayor of our town and we know the issues in our town. We have been fortunate enough to be able to make a difference in our community by volunteering to assist with fund raising events and worthwhile community initiatives.

We know all of our neighbours, including a less affluent group of neighbours consisting of an unknown number of adults and twelve adorable and polite children who live in a makeshift ramshackle in the dense jungle foliage in our neighbourhood. The children pick limes and coconuts, and papayas from their trees, and knock on our door to sell us their wares. Sometimes they bring us complimentary cucumbers from their garden. Their roosters, chickens, dogs, cats and even their pig wander in front of our house. We have helped them have their dogs neutered, and occasionally we give them a ride into the next town. We have taken the children to a local swimming pool and park that they could otherwise not afford. If on occasion we require help with something unfamiliar, they are most willing to provide it. These little moments, enrich our lives and make our life here, special.

We do not have the luxury of garbage pickup at our house and this means that we have to carry our garbage to the pickup area which is located four blocks away, just like the local people. The streets in our town are not paved and after a heavy rainfall, when the streets flood, we have to navigate the puddles on foot or by car, just like the local people. Conversations with the local people arise due to these little daily interactions, allowing us to develop common interests, such as fixing the road and obtaining door to door garbage service, forming the basis for friendships, or at least friendly acquaintances.

The brick house beside us is unpainted and some might say, unsightly. One of our other neighbours has rebar sticking out of his roof, which spoils our view from the back patio. We have differences of opinion with one of our neighbours who owns bungalows, who occasionally receives a busload of boisterous vacationers, over how late into the evening it is appropriate to play loud music. Some of our neighbours clear lots by burning the foliage, resulting in black ash in our pool and all over our patios. If we are not receiving city water it is up to us to resolve the issue, but resolve we do. Sometimes it is challenging to resolve our issues, and certainly more difficult to resolve than if we had a management council to resolve our issues for us.

We are friends with some of our neighbours and we watch out for each other's homes, *just* as if we were living in a gated community. However, our good friends live here, for just a few months of the year.

If the whim strikes us we have the freedom to plant banana and mango trees along the road in front of our house. Our pool is sparkling clean because we have control over how it is maintained. We hire the locals for small jobs around our home, as needed. If our standards are not met, we have the choice to hire them again, or not. The headaches of home maintenance lend to interactions with the locals which force us to immerse ourselves in the culture and experiences and to learn local language. The reward is developing friendships with the local people, and being invited to attend festivities and share experiences.

Our home is large, spacious and stunningly gorgeous, and the setting resembles paradise. The cost of our home was comparable to the cost of a condominium in a gated community on the beach. If we had to do it all over again, we would, despite the issues and the fact that the surrounding neighbourhood is not picture perfect.

We believe our choice to live in a non-gated community has provided us with a greater opportunity to immerse ourselves in the local culture. Not only, because our neighbours consist primarily of the local people but because taking care of the maintenance of our home, and carrying out the essential tasks of day-to-day life, forces us to interact with the local people. The experience has literally plunged us into the culture of the country we chose to live in.

What is right for us may in fact be a nightmare for you. Grab your list, review your needs and preferences, review your values and most importantly ask yourself what is it exactly that you wish to experience when you retire to your dream home in your chosen country.

Is it simply a place in the sun, and being surrounded by like minded friends, and all the conveniences of life offered in your home town? Or is your dream to immerse yourself in the daily adventures of the country you are moving to, to learn a new language and experience every facet, for better or worse?

We chose a private residence in a local community because we wanted to be immersed in the culture of living in another country because we wanted the freedom and control of making *all* the decisions pertaining to our home, and simply to enjoy the privacy of owning our dream home in paradise. The downside to this is the having to find responsible persons to care for our home, whenever we go on vacation and the amount of work required maintaining our home.

Points to Consider

Gated Communities

- Safety & Sense of Security – However it really depends on the gated community you choose
- Peaceful lifestyle because the locations are usually set in areas, away from traffic and because of the restrictions and rules in place
- Usually offer great amenities and recreational facilities. Some communities have full time staff on hand to help residents out.
- Easy friendship, which is especially important to retirees, single men and women
- Worry free living. Management takes care of the place when you are absent - The downside is the lack of control over decisions made on maintenance and upkeep
- Shared maintenance costs – Lack of control over decisions made on maintenance and upkeep.
- Monthly maintenance fees are usually higher than the norm but home owners vote on what is important
- Common areas and roads are usually maintained to a higher standard than in non-gated communities
- More affordable than private residences if you are seeking a beach front home.

Non-Gated

- Offers a greater opportunity for expatriates to immerse and integrate themselves in the culture of their chosen country
- Provides a greater opportunity on a day-to-day basis to experience the everyday challenges, wonders and sometimes the frustrations of living in another country
- Offers more privacy and personal freedom to live the lifestyle you are dreaming of – but less security
- Private pool and yard, if your choice is a private residence
- Daily life is simply not as convenient as it is in a gated community
- Communication can be a challenge – However, it forces you to learn to speak the language
- If your choice is a private residence, you have more control over maintenance and upkeep of your home, but less control over the surrounding neighbourhood's appearance and function.
- The opportunity to earn an additional income exists if you choose to rent out your residence. Condominiums have a high rental rate and they may also have someone who manages rentals for you – Some gated communities do allow rentals to some extent
- A private residence – usually provides a better real estate investment – If the property is beachfront, it will always prove to be a better investment irrelevant of the dwelling type.
- Developing friendships is more challenging as you need to seek out the opportunities – If you are not a naturally gregarious person this can be isolating.

Gated community or Integrating in the Local Community?

The question is a life changing decision which requires a lot of thought.

Once you have answered this question, and are armed with your list of priorities, take the time to choose a good realtor who will work with you, and who is willing to spend the time you need, in order to help you make one of the most important decisions you may make during your lifetime.

A good realtor will not sell you a property that does not meet your needs, as they want their clients to realize their dream, and be happy with their final decision. A good realtor will consult with you about your needs and preferences; be knowledgeable about the area they service and guide you through the neighbourhood of your chosen community and advise you on the pros and cons of the residence of your choice. A good realtor will have a good reputation and credentials, as well as patience. A good realtor will have references; make sure you ask for, and check them.

About the author: Christina Stobbs is a former resident of Vancouver, B.C., now owner and operator of an exclusive B&B providing "Personalized Vacation Experiences" in the magical Mexican beach town of Los Ayala, Nayarit Mexico. Christina has also, recently starting a business called "This & That – Arts & Marketing" and is currently writing a novel in which she narrates the story of "Day to Day" life in small town rural Mexico, and shares the adventure of pursuing the dream of living in Mexico with her husband Robert Stobbs. They made the life changing decision to move to Mexico last April, to buy a home to run as a Bed & Breakfast, and to live full time in the paradise called Mexico. Visit her website www.tropicalmanorhouse.com

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Slow Down... or Else

By David Galland, The Casey Report / Nov 09 • Categorized as [Asset Protection](#) • [Download Print Friendly PDF](#)



On a whim following our Denver Summit – and despite truly abysmal weather – Casey Research CEO Olivier Garret and I cabbied it down to a local public golf course for a quick nine holes. Afterwards we were returning to the hotel through a neighborhood best described as poor, but not disreputable. While our cab made its way down a side street, a radar gun-wielding policeman leaped out of the bushes down the block, pulled the trigger, and waved our immigrant cab driver to the curb. The offense, we soon learned, was going five miles an hour over the speed limit in a school zone... well after school was out and with no other children in sight.

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Waiting for our ticket to be issued, we watched as another of Denver's finest jumped out of a hidey hole on an intersecting street, fired off his radar gun, and proceeded to pull over another slow-moving perp. With such a low tolerance for

excess speed, it struck me that what the police were doing had a lot less to do with protecting the public and much more with revenue harvesting. And that the school zone was just a cover for a bonus penalty on the ticket.

Being naturally curious, I subsequently poked around and confirmed my impression. Studies have proven that, in bad economic times, municipalities look to replace flagging revenues by turning the dial up on ticketing.

These studies show that, in the year following a downturn in revenues, municipalities issue "significantly more" tickets. Specifically, a 10% decrease in revenue growth results in a 6.4% increase in the growth of traffic tickets.

In *Red Ink in the Rearview Mirror* by the St. Louis Fed, the authors make some astute observations about the nature of this sort of revenue harvesting. The following excerpt is worth a read and some further pondering, as it paints a clear stripe down the road leading to your wealth.

The notion that local governments may use traffic tickets as a revenue tool has received considerable attention in recent years largely because of the growing use of traffic cameras to enforce red-light violations. While most studies find that red-light cameras have reduced right-angle collisions and red-light violations, some studies have also noted a significant increase in rear-end collisions following the installation of the cameras, making their net effect on safety a point of contention.

Combined with the fact that local governments frequently share in the ticket fines with camera manufacturers, many observers have concluded that red-light cameras are revenue generation devices rather than tools to improve public safety. In a more general sense, this view essentially holds that local traffic enforcement policies, much like other government policies, may be a function of two (often opposing) motives of public officials – political interests and public interests (Becker 1986; Saffer and Grossman 1987; Mixon 1995).

Given the limited revenue-raising options, erosion of property and sales tax bases, and a general distaste for tax increases by the public, local policy makers are under increased pressures to find alternative revenue sources (Tannenwald 2001; Crain 2003; Brunori 2006).

[...] Traffic tickets provide an attractive revenue source for local governments because the amount of revenue that can be generated is often unrestricted, they provide a mechanism to capture revenue from non-residents and non-

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voters, and most traffic offenses possess a low strict-liability threshold to achieve a conviction (as opposed to the higher criminal intent standard).

That reminds me of the reign of Caligula and how he instituted rules allowing for the wealth confiscation of anyone found less than enthusiastic about his particular form of government. Over time, this became a major source of revenue for the increasingly bankrupt state.

As was revealed more recently in California's budget wrangling, the states and municipalities are experiencing rapid declines in their revenues. With property tax revenues plummeting, local governments – and there are about 90,000 local taxing authorities in the U.S. – are scrambling to find new revenue sources, including levying income and sales taxes.

And by turning up the heat on cab drivers that go five miles an hour over the speed limit.

Then there's this from the British, who may have a great sense of humor, but it seems to be balanced by their lack of irony, given they provided the stage for Orwell's *1984*. According to the Times of London...

People who emit more than their fair share of carbon emissions are having their pay docked in a trial that could lead to rationing being reintroduced via the workplace after an absence of half a century.

Britain's first employee carbon rationing scheme is about to be extended, after the trial demonstrated the effectiveness of fining people for exceeding their personal emissions target. Unlike the energy-saving schemes adopted by thousands of companies, the rationing scheme monitors employees' personal emissions, including home energy bills, petrol purchases and holiday flights.

Workers who take a long-haul flight are likely to be fined for exceeding their annual ration unless they take drastic action in other areas, such as switching off the central heating or cutting out almost all car journeys. Employees are required to submit quarterly reports detailing their consumption. They are also set a target, which reduces each year, for the amount of carbon they can emit.

Those who exceed their ration pay a fine for every kilogram they emit over the limit. The money is deducted from their pay and the level of the fine is printed on pay slips. Those who consume less than their ration are rewarded at the same rate per kilogram.

(You can read the full article [here](#).)

The whole carbon footprint issue and the massive taxes associated with it are literally nothing more than a ploy to keep the government and its supporters in (taxpayer-provided) high corn. That it is a ruse is clear when you examine a recent Bloomberg poll on what the public is actually concerned with...



(Thanks to [Whatsupwiththat.com](#) for bringing that poll to our attention.)

This is all headed in the wrong direction, and for the decidedly wrong reason of not wanting to address the underlying problem of too much, and too expensive, government.

The list of slippery acts of officialdom trying to boost its revenues at the expense of those with low political coverage could fill a book, but I will leave off by sharing an [eye-opening video](#) from ABC News, about the government grabbing safe deposit boxes and selling the contents.

If you want to avoid being stripped of your wealth, it is time to stand up. Alternatively, the point where you'll want to consider voting with your feet is rapidly approaching.

Doing nothing, on the other hand, will just leave you as a sheep to the shearing pen, or worse.



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