

I've been reading lots of expat forums, blogs, etc. over the past couple of years, and I find a lot of it is geared towards the "incredibly cheap real estate" or "beach paradise real estate."

Having lived in five countries over the past two decades, including a couple of beach paradises, I would like to stress that a decision on where to relocate should not hinge exclusively on the price of real estate or the availability of postcard quality beaches. In the last place I lived, in Turkey, for \$600 per month I rented a three-floor, 5 bedroom villa with communal pool and stunning views of the Mediterranean and the Greek island of Samos.

But guess what, the town that shall remain unnamed was such a dump that we couldn't wait to leave after a year. In the end we were down to two places to eat out that we truly liked (a third having closed after our first year) one of which was the Turkish version of a greasy spoon, and the other too expensive to frequent too often. We were lucky in that our friends from other towns visited often for work-related reasons, otherwise, we never made any friends locally.

The expats in general were of the European fry-by-the-pool-clutching-beer-for-8-hours type, and we did not find any common ground at all, regardless of the nationalities. The locals were of the hyper-predatory kind, ready to fleece anything that walked and carried a foreign passport.

This was nothing like the previous town we had lived in, a few hours east, where you couldn't spend more than a week without making friends of various national origins, from Canadian and American to British, German, and most importantly, Turkish. Here the real estate had long ago stopped being a ridiculous bargain, our rental there was a spider infested shack, but all around the quality of life was infinitely better. There were many more good restaurants, and affordable as well, and it was good to feel like one was actually in Turkey, and not in some expat ghetto.

Cut to our present home in the outskirts of Punta del Este, in Uruguay. We've been here for under two years now, after building our "dream that I can afford at 40 home," a hundred yards from the beach, and to be honest, the house itself has dominated a large chunk of our lives. But the friendships we have made among people all ages and from all over the world are what makes this a fantastic place to live. Availability of good food -- at restaurants but also at farmers markets and supermarkets -- are a big thing for us, and although we miss the ethnic stuff, there's always Buenos Aires across the pond. Weatherwise, we are no longer flattened out by the one-two combination of excessive heat and humidity, as in Turkey, where we spent 6 months with the air conditioning running 24 hours a day. In fact, we never even installed the air conditioning units we wired our house for.

Today is a bad winter day, gale-force winds, temps in the 50s, but even in winter we get beautiful sunny days in the 60s and even low 70s, and the winter lasts for 3 months, and no more. Securitiwise, in my experience no place is safe from burglaries. To begin with, no "gated community with 24 hour security" is truly safe, it's just a better identified target, with ineffectual guards that can be easily reduced by bribes or threats or brutal force. So if you worry about security, look at poverty indicators for the country, at employment and crime statistics for the town and region, and consider whether any recent explosive growth of "luxury development" has been truly absorbed by the community surrounding it. But there are various levels of violence in various countries, and some affect not only the criminals but also the police in charge of defending you from them.

After a house break-in in Turkey we were so insulted by the police (who were protecting the burglars) that on retrospect, I would not call them again for anything. At a wider level, the increasing social anger and xenophobia over the past five years meant that in the end my husband chose to hide my Jewish last name and give out my mother's maiden name, an innocent sounding Spanish name. So I would say, think about weather, people, institutions, traditions, etc., and *then* look at real estate and ponder the relative value of a bargain.