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DESTINATIONS

Five more hot-spots for well-to-do snowbirds



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Sun-seeking retirees who are not pinching pennies have plenty of options for escaping winter. Luxury amenities, private beaches and championship golf courses are waiting in out-of-the way destinations throughout the Caribbean and Mexico.

Jet-set communities established decades ago – or recently designed with well-heeled travellers in mind – offer challenging diversions, top cuisines and stunning scenery.

"Life in Latin countries is less hectic than in North America, and you have room to stretch free here in every way," says Sergio Llach, director of Sotheby's International Realty in the Dominican Republic.

The official language in these places is Spanish, though English is widely spoken, he says, and "the culture is extremely friendly and vibrant." Visitors should note, however, that "things don't move on Canadian time, and sometimes 'in a few hours' can mean 'in a few days,' " Mr. Llach warns.

"That's the biggest challenge of adapting from a 'Type A' North American life to a tropical Latin American life," he says.

High-net-worth snowbirds are inclined to try out more than one destination, says Stephen Fine, president of snowbirdadvisor.ca, which provides online resources and services.

"Snowbirds used to pick a place and settle there for the next 20 years," says Mr. Fine, while today they are a little more "antsy" and choose to move around, especially if cost and distance are no obstacle.

"People are more adventurous and they want to try different places," he says, noting that after checking out a few spots, snowbirds opt for comfort as they age and eventually stay put in a location where they've made friends.

Here are a few Latin destinations for the non-frugal snowbird.

Casa de Campo, Dominican Republic

This spot, on the country's southeast shore, is light years away from the fixed-priced-package joints for which the island is known.

Casa de Campo is steeped in history, known for its rich agriculture. It was purchased in the late 1970s by Gulf & Western Corp., a parent company of Paramount Pictures, which developed the resort and built a 16th-century replica of a Mediterranean village, Altos de Chavon. Today Casa de Campo is known for its exclusivity and diversity of cultures, a 7,000-acre resort with world-renowned facilities.

"Living here is a lifestyle of ease and simplicity," says Jason Kycek, senior vice-president of sales and marketing for the resort. He calls it a "self-contained paradise" that has its own power and water plants, high-level security, fire department, hospital, airport, marina, supermarket, movie theatre, dining options and sporting activities.

"One never really truly has to leave," he says, although the adventurous can visit nearby Catalina Island, hike the highest mountain peak in the Caribbean or tour the colonial quarter of Santo Domingo, the capital city.

Accommodations range from townhomes and condominiums to golf villas and oceanfront estates with private beaches and employee quarters. Prices range from \$350,000 to \$25-million (U.S.), with an average of about \$2-million.

Ambergris Caye, Belize

This island off Belize's eastern shore is perfect for an upscale tropical getaway. Part of the Belize Barrier Reef, the Caye and its central town of San Pedro are seeing more development, services and amenities, says Kristin Fisher, owner of Sotheby's International Realty in Belize.

"We now enjoy a Saturday morning farmers market, daily yoga, wine bars, coffee shops and even a sushi bar," she says.

The area is especially remarkable, though, for being part of one of the largest barrier reefs in the world, spanning 300 kilometres along the coast. It's a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a breeding ground for turtles and other sea life.

Diversions on Ambergris Caye include snorkelling, scuba diving, sailing and fishing on the barrier reef, a 10-minute boat ride from the coast. "We have the opportunity to snorkel and dive with nurse sharks, stingrays, manatees, eels, turtles and schools of tropical fish," Ms. Fisher says.

Residents include Canadians and Americans but also local Belizeans, "who are a joy to get to know," Ms. Fisher says. "You will have just as many local Belize friends as North American friends." Dining options in San Pedro include a fresh fusion of Caribbean and Mexican influences. Daily tours to inland Belize explore Mayan sites, caves and rainforests.

Visitors will find flights to central Belize City direct from Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary. Within the country, Tropic Air and Maya Island Air fly to all regions. On Ambergris Caye, everyone gets around by golf cart and bicycle as well as Coastal Xpress water taxis.

Accommodations range from condos to beachfront homes, with prices up to \$2.5-million (U.S.) or more. You can purchase or sell your property in Belize in U.S. dollars, Ms. Fisher notes. There is no capital gains tax in Belize, and property taxes are low.

Ambergris Caye won't stay a secret for long, she warns. Several high-end hotels are going up and Leonardo DiCaprio is developing an eco-resort on nearby Blackadore Caye.

Querencia, Mexico

Located near Cabo San Lucas at the southern tip of Mexico's Baja Peninsula, Querencia is a private community with luxury properties that include resort-style amenities.

Set atop the highest point in San Jose del Cabo, Querencia offers panoramas of the surrounding desert and sparkling Sea of Cortez. The 730-hectare gated enclave includes a variety of residences that range from \$750,000 to \$12-million (U.S.). Jorge Carrera, chief executive officer of Querencia, says that average prices are about \$2.8-million.

Visitors can enjoy a golf course that's ranked among the best 100 in the world, and "the scuba diving is fantastic, as the Sea of Cortez was named the Natural Aquarium of the World by Jacques Cousteau," says Mr. Carrera. "It's very easy to get here and we offer all kind of activities year-round."

The area is known for its Hispanic heritage, with Spanish missions that date from Spain's colonization, as well as history from early local tribes, he says. "Today people come to enjoy the weather, golf, fishing, surfing and outdoor activities like hiking and mountain biking."

Mr. Carrera says "the culture in Cabo is friendly and authentic," and there are world-class spa amenities and farm-to-table restaurants, as well as clubs for kids and teenagers.

As one of the hottest destinations in Latin America, Cabo can be reached by more than 50 daily non-stop international flights. Once here, visitors can get around using public transportation, rental cars and private shuttles. Mr. Carrera warns, however, that "like any fast-growing city, there are some challenges around infrastructure, but nothing to affect lifestyle."

Winding Bay, Bahamas

In Winding Bay, the exclusive Abaco Club is a tropical paradise where members, homeowners and visitors can relax, recreate and rejuvenate, says Kristi Hull, the club's director of sales.

The club is on Great Abaco Island, about 290 kilometres east of Palm Beach, Fla. Abaco Club is known for its remoteness but is easily accessible via two nearby international airports, with direct flights from multiple U.S. cities on major airlines.

Abaco offers a top-rated golf course, spa, fitness facility, water sports, tennis courts, gourmet dining and a "picture-perfect" four-kilometre powder-soft beach, says Ms. Hull, which serves as the gateway to Winding Bay, which offers world-famous fishing, serene boating and sailing.

Real estate offerings range from one-bedroom cabanas and two- to four-bedroom cottage villas to grand, six-bedroom oceanfront estate homes, she says. Prices range from \$400,000 to \$10-million (U.S.), with average prices between \$1.75-million and \$4-million.

Residents and guests can enjoy snorkelling, kayaking, Hobie Cat sailing and paddle-boarding. Sightings of dolphins and sea turtles are "a regular occurrence," Ms. Hull says.

The club organizes events such as barbecue nights with local bands, beach bonfires and s'mores for the kids. There are day trips on the water to neighbouring Elbow Cay, which has one of the last manual lighthouses in the world; Man-O-War Cay, a boat-building centre; and Guana Cay, famous for its Sunday pig roasts.

The local culture is diverse and "rich with customs that continually remind visitors of the love for celebration and community in the Bahamas," adds Ms. Hull.

"Abaconians are eager to show off their island, tell stories and point out the hidden treasures."

Ajijic, Mexico

Among a series of charming villages on the shores of Lake Chapala, the largest lake in Mexico, Ajijic stands out for its natural beauty, tranquility and climate. Just south of Guadalajara in central Mexico, the area has one of the largest communities of expats living in the country, says Graciela Zamudio Conde, general manager of Guadalajara Sotheby's International Realty.

These visitors, both seasonal and full-time residents, create an exotic blend of cultures. They come here to enjoy outdoor activities, spectacular lake and mountain views, the cool, clear air and the warm Mexican culture. It's close to Guadalajara, the country's second-largest city, with its museums, shopping centres and high-end health services.

"You have all the conveniences of living in a small town, but if you want to go to the theatre or opera, it's nearby," Ms. Conde says.

Gated communities are available. Prices range from \$200,000 to \$1.3-million (U.S.), and "there are acres of land available to develop your own mansion," Ms. Conde suggests. While the town is expanding – Sotheby's is involved in a new project called Altolago, a tall residential building on the shores of the lake – residents like the fact that the area is not heavily touristy.

"It's a hidden paradise. They don't want more development coming on," she says.

Ajijic is well connected, just 25 minutes away from Guadalajara International Airport. Its recreational and social life includes handicraft workshops and charitable activities, and visitors will find plenty of restaurants, shops, galleries, golf clubs, a yacht club, spas, boat tours and more.

Day trippers can visit Guadalajara, which is home to a historic cathedral with magnificent towers; the Chapultepec, a business and entertainment area; and the "zona rosa," with coffee houses, bars, boutiques and art galleries. The nearby mountain towns of Tapalpa and Mazamitl, two hours away, offer views, log cabins in the woods and lower temperatures. Four hours away is the coast of Bahía de Banderas, headed by beautiful Puerto Vallarta.