

What I Love (and Don't Love) About Living Abroad

Kirsten Raccuia

As we get older, our habits—good or bad—root deeper into our lives. Change becomes harder. We are trapped by our comfort zone. Even if we are unhappy, we tend to choose the unhappy we know over the uncertainty we don't.

Moving abroad, for a month, a year, or a lifetime, challenges all the assuredness you've grown accustomed to. You are pushed beyond your comfort zone. Nothing is certain. Nothing is normal. Nothing is as simple as it was.

Yet somehow you get through, push on, and find your new normal. Only then do you realize how much you've grown, how strong you are, and how making your own rules is the only way to actually live.

Things I Love

Affordability

The other day in Penang, Malaysia, I had a spa day (yes, I'm spoiled). An hour-long massage, an hour-long facial, and a 45-minute body scrub. It cost me only \$103. In Chicago, a one-hour treatment at a good spa starts at \$90, and that's without the tip.

The three-bedroom, four-bathroom, oceanfront condo in Penang that my husband, Mark, and I rent costs \$675 a month. A similar condo in Chicago, on the lakefront, would cost 10 times that.

A house cleaner in Chicago costs \$100 for two hours. Here I pay \$19 for four hours.

If you've always felt like you've got champagne tastes on a beer budget, moving abroad brings those luxuries within reach.

Travel

Since my cost of living is more affordable, I have more left over to spend. For me, that equates to more travel, which is ridiculously cheap here. The only time we've spent more than \$200 on a ticket was when we flew to Hawaii. It's common to find flights for under \$100, and we regularly pop over to Phuket, Thailand for even less.

We never pay more than \$50 for accom-

modation; for a full-amenity, 3- to 4-star hotel, in a great location.

Friends

Before I left, all my friends were Americans from Chicago. That's not a bad thing, but the friendship circle was pretty small.

Now, we have friends from all over the world, and our social life is busier than ever.

At any given social outing, there are more nationalities than I can count on one hand, sometimes two. I love learning about other people's customs, teaching them mine, and making new traditions together.

Freedom

Before we moved here, we had two cars and a condo full of stuff. However, before we left, we sold everything, except for family heirlooms and photos. It was difficult at the time, but afterward, we immediately felt a sense of freedom.

Now, we aren't attached to the stuff. If we want to move to Uruguay or Vietnam tomorrow, we can pack our two suitcases and leave. The only thing we'd bring is the art that we have accumulated on our travels because it brings us joy.

Reinvention

Abroad, you get to start over. You can follow your passions, do some soul searching, and figure out what makes you the happiest.

I ran a wholesale clothing agency in Chicago but secretly dreamed of being a travel writer. After moving to Penang, I was given that chance by *International Living*, and now I run a blog.

Perspective

When you live in the U.S., the media constantly bombards you with news and only one angle. You get a snippet of world news daily, but that's about it.

Living abroad expands your horizons and shows you an entirely different world.

It is very interesting listening to news about the U.S. from a different point of view.

I am grateful that I'm an American. I love America. But there is a big world out there, and it's not all centered around the U.S.

Things I Don't Love

I can't get some of my creature comforts

Sometimes you want a little slice of home. Turkey and avocado sandwiches are my comfort foods. We can get avocados, but they are hard little rocks. And the only way to eat turkey here is to buy a whole one and cook it yourself. I want sliced deli turkey, not the entire bird.

“Living abroad expands your horizons.”

I've become cheap

Things I regularly bought in Chicago now seem expensive. A good martini at our favorite steakhouse costs as much as a week's worth of food at my local market in Penang. I never thought

about how I spent that money before moving. But now, when I convert U.S. dollars to Malaysian ringgit, I think twice.

I've had to relearn everything

Driving on the opposite side of the road is challenging enough, especially since the road rules here are mere suggestions. Scooters fly at me from all angles, going the wrong way down a one-way road, driving on the sidewalks. It's sheer mayhem here, but I've mastered it.

It's not just driving. Setting up a bank account, buying a car, getting insurance, seeing a doctor; it is all different. Not worse, not better. Just different.

Living abroad isn't easy...at first. And then, before you know it, it is. After moving from Chicago to Penang, Malaysia, six years ago, I've already dealt with the ups-and-downs, the ins-and-outs of overseas life. It isn't always easy. However, it's the most rewarding and life-changing experience I've ever had.

Embrace it, don't fight it, and you'll thrive. ■



Penang, Malaysia is an island of contrasts, from modern cities to timeless tropical beaches.

Working From Home... While Overseas

“The Natural Environment Here Is Really Beautiful”

Names: Eric Trujillo and Amalia Maloney del Riego

From: Denver, Colorado

Living in: Dénia, Spain

Fate can be complicated sometimes, but as any number of wise moms have pointed out, things usually turn out for the best. Eric Trujillo first came to Spain expecting to move to Madrid. He had a contract bringing him to the city, where he was supposed to work on an animation project. At the last minute, the job fell through, and Eric was left wondering what to do.

It was June 2015, and Eric and his wife, Amalia, had already made all their preparations for a move to Spain. Madrid, after a period of reflection, didn't fit what they wanted from a city. Both wanted to be near the sea. They considered Málaga, in the south of Spain, but eventually settled on the compact, cosmopolitan city of Valencia on Spain's east coast. It worked out well for a while, but when they were exploring the region, they came across the seaside town of Dénia and were smitten.

They meet me in their modern three-bedroom, two-bathroom duplex condo and

show me around. It's beautifully situated, with views of the Mediterranean on both sides and tiled terraces for relaxing outdoors in the warm Costa Blanca evenings. The view to the north, particularly, is spectacular. The steep limestone sides of the Montgó massif plunge into the deep water and glow in the russet tones of the sunset. Eric's home office looks out on that vista, an inspiring backdrop for his various work projects in film editing, animation, and production.

The apartment costs them \$1,000 a month, and they find the utilities very affordable. Dénia's landlords like to rent to Americans, Eric explains, because they look after places well and pay on time. It's certainly true in their case. Eric and Amalia, both of whom work in the creative arts (Amalia works remotely in lifestyle/travel blogging and content creation for PR companies), have added distinctive design and décor to the apartment in the form of hand-made artwork and planting. It's a bright and engaging home, made all the more attractive by their personal touches.

Mostly, the couple work on their own projects from their home offices, but occasionally they collaborate. “We're both photographers,” says Eric, “so we do that

together. Otherwise, the creative split is broadly that Amalia writes, and I do the branding. Amalia designs websites, I'll create video for those. If you have a unique voice, that's the key. We combine our skillsets, and it lets us live here on our own terms.”

And they live well. Eric is a self-confessed gastronaut and prepares a handsome spread of locally sourced tapas for my visit. We nibble on that while out on their expansive sunset terrace as he explains the appeal of Dénia. “It's a really international town. It's not an expat enclave, but it's not exclusively Spanish either. You hear lots of languages being spoken. And the natural environment here is really beautiful. The sea, the mountains, and it's so well placed for exploring the rest of Europe. It's worked out perfectly for us.”—Seán Keenan.

“Life Is Easy and Casual Here. I Love the Atmosphere in Penang”

Name: Charlie McGuire

From: Sydney, Australia

Living in: Penang, Malaysia

“I never meant to stay here,” says Charlie McGuire. “I came to Penang for a two-month trial period and never left.” Charlie wanted to take a couple of months and see what it was like to work from overseas. He had never spent more than two or three weeks away from Australia and his freight forwarding business. He was determined to see if it could be done.

His dream was to work from Australia for six months, then travel through Europe for the other half of the year and work remotely. Penang was a test. If his business went well there, it would be his first foray into making that dream happen.

He never planned to move permanently to Penang. But love can change your plans.

He had a good life in Australia. A simple life, right on the beach, and he spent as much time in the water as possible. Yet... “My life was stale. I was standing still and doing the same things every day. I wanted more,” says Charlie.

It wasn't the first time Charlie had been to Penang. He came for a vacation a few times to participate in the island's traditional dragon boat rowing events.

“I knew Penang was an ideal place to live; it's easy to get around, almost everyone speaks English, and there is great internet,” affirms Charlie. “But I still wasn't

planning to move here.”

When he went for his two-month stint in Penang, he joined a dragon boat team and fell in love. Not just with the island but with one of his teammates.

After going back and forth to Penang on a tourist visa, he decided to apply for the Sarawak Malaysia My Second Home (SMM2H) visa program. Its requirements are less stringent and less costly than the MM2H. All in all, it took nine weeks to be approved. Now he has a five-year visa to live anywhere in Malaysia, including Borneo.

Charlie wakes up happily in Penang every day around 7 a.m. He checks his emails to make sure everything is running smoothly. Most of the time, it is. In two years, there hasn't been anything that Charlie couldn't handle from Penang. Some of his clients don't even know he is gone permanently because he still has an Australian phone number.

After he works for a bit, he goes for a long walk around the neighborhood, then goes home and does a little more work. He works exclusively via the internet or phone, so if anything pops up, he handles it immediately. He doesn't need to be in Australia at all.

Charlie is usually done working by midday, and he can spend the rest of it exercising, exploring George Town, and spending time with his love, Amanda, and her family.

He rents out his home on the beach in Australia for \$1,085 a month. That almost pays for his life in Penang. His biggest expense is his three-bedroom, two-bathroom condo in the middle of town, which costs \$500. It's a modern building with all the amenities; a pool, a gym, and it's walking distance from a huge range of hawker food stalls and restaurants.

He is spoiled for choice when it comes to meals. Penang is known for its street food, and nothing costs more than \$3. “I love the hawker stalls. Everyone gets their choice of food. No arguing. No one worries about the bills; you buy what you want. Everyone is happy.”

Charlie is not going anywhere for the foreseeable future; he's too busy enjoying his new lease on life. Thinking back about the last two years, Charlie states, “Life is easy and casual here. I love the atmosphere in Penang, and there is so

much culture and history.”

Charlie's dream of splitting time between Australia and Europe has been replaced by the life he is living and loving in Penang. He's a happy man, no longer standing still.—*Kirsten Raccuia.*

“I Can Work on a Computer From Home, or the Beach”

Name: Robert Ross

From: Manhattan Beach, California

Living in: Montañita, Ecuador

Blonde and tan, with the look of a man who gets a lot of time outdoors, Robert Ross chuckles when I admire the bamboo construction of the bar area around the pool at his hotel/apartment complex, Montañita Estates.

“That stuff's not half as easy as it looks. It drinks varnish. If it gets even the tiniest bit wet, it gets moldy and blackens. It looks nice but avoid it if you want an easy life.”

There's a slight irony to that statement though. I meet Robert in Montañita on a Thursday because in this off-season part of the year, he spends the early half of each week in an apartment he rents farther

north in Santa Mariañita, where the afternoon winds are better for kiteboarding. The other half of the year, he stays in Montañita, and surfs.

In between all that, Robert looks after the management and maintenance

of the hillside complex he's built just inland from the town's main bus stop. That detail is a crucial one in the success of the business. “When I came here first, there was just nowhere to stay. Surfers were getting off the bus, knowing that there were world-class waves here, but they were stuck for accommodation. There were only six listings on VRBO; you couldn't find a long-term option.”

Robert had been living in Los Angeles' Manhattan Beach, working as a consultant with the Green Dot bank. When the company went public, he got a payout and headed to Montañita. The opportunity was obvious. The operation started out as four three-bedroom units. “When I opened up, the entire promotion effort was a simple poster taped to the bus shelter. We were full from the first day. I made \$15,000 in the first month, on a \$200,000 investment.”

Robert talks about the early days with affection, about the local surfers showing him the best spots on the coast in return for shared rides there, and about how he'd headed up into what was then farmland with a machete to pace out the perimeter of the land he ended up buying. Back then, Montañita wasn't much more than a fishing village. Excellent waves, surfers, and the news-spreading capability of the internet have since transformed the village into an international party hub.

Now, the strip between the bus stop and the beach is a riotous (though wholly good-natured) hive of activity. Gap-year millennials sip lattes and munch excellent French pastries at Tiki Limbo, slow-travel boomers sit at roadside ceviche bars on Calle Segunda, stallholders sell colorful kitschy trinkets (and some very nice handmade jewelry if you're willing to rummage), and they all end up, after dark, dancing the night away under the thatched roof palapas of Lost Beach Club. It's inclusive, exhausting, but immense fun.

Robert realized, though, that there was a market that wasn't being catered to by the party scene: surfers and active travelers who, while they weren't averse to a night's partying, weren't there to spend their days recovering from hangovers. The Montañita Estates communal areas include two pools, a gym, a martial arts studio, a restaurant, and a selection of large-scale artworks which Robert commissioned from local artists. It's a healthy, relaxed place, where guests are more likely to greet the sunrise with yoga salutations than squint at it as they stagger from an all-night party.

Currently, Robert owns the 15-room hotel and about 2.5 acres of land. His partners own another 2.5 acres, where they've built houses and condos to sell. A large plaza, stores, and a park are on the plans. He shows me around his own on-site condo, with sleek white furniture, open fireplace, and ocean views.

“I manage the marketing, money, and legal aspects of the business. The benefit is that I can work on a computer from home, or the beach. I also deal with maintenance. There's always something broken or that needs to be painted. That's what I do.”

The beauty of it is that it's all right there at his door, and it's flexible enough to allow him to get out kiteboarding or surfing when he wants to. When he's not varnishing all that bamboo.—*Seán Keenan.* ■



New road projects are beginning to tame Colombia's mountain regions.

New Routes in Colombia

Colombia has three sub-ranges of the Andes mountains running down its spine. This makes for breathtaking, verdant scenery; provides the perfect growing conditions for coffee beans; and offers mild year-round temperatures for a country that sits just above the equator. What's not great, though, is driving through windy mountain roads between major cities and towns.

The national government has recognized this and is undertaking major road infrastructure improvements. In August 2019,

"The Aburrá-Oriente Road Connection" opened—a network of tunnels and a new road improving connections between Medellín, Colombia's second largest city, and the José María Córdoba international airport in Rionegro. The \$317 million project included two long

tunnels, one short tunnel, and an open-sky track. Transit time between Medellín and the airport is now only 18 minutes, reduced from 45 minutes using the old route. Towns in the area around the airport can now be considered bedroom communities.

Another major project, the 97-mile-long "Vías del Nus" will include a four-lane divided highway, a twin-tube tunnel, and construction of 15 bridges. The tunnel alone is projected to cost \$149 million. The "Vías del Nus" is scheduled to open at the end of 2020.

This route will become the main cargo outlet from Medellín to the Caribbean coast and is expected to handle 17,000 vehicles per day. And for Medellín residents, driving to the beach from the mountains will no longer be an all-day trip.—*IL Colombia Correspondent Nancy Kiernan.*

"Transit from Medellín to the airport is now 18 minutes."

Hang Around in Penang

In Penang, Malaysia, test yourself on the Gravityz obstacle course at Komtar, the island's tallest building. It is the highest ropes course challenge in the world. And if that's not extreme enough, it's on the outside of a skyscraper, hanging off the 65th floor. There are six different obstacles; start with the easiest to boost your confidence. You can sit outside on the

ledge, walk on a floating bridge, lean backward over the drop with nothing but safety cables to rely on...there's even a zipline up there.

The whole experience takes about an hour, which includes the safety briefing. And if you aren't into that kind of rush, you can watch from inside via the floor-to-ceiling windows.—*IL contributor Kirsten Raccuia.*

Marathons and Manors in Latvia

Tens of thousands of elite athletes from Latvia and around the world will be signing up for the Rimi Riga Marathon, which has been awarded prestigious Gold Label status by the World Athletics organization—the only such event in northern Europe.

Taking place May 17, 2020, the event will be the last chance to qualify for the Tokyo Olympic Games before the end of May deadline. (See: Rimigamarathon.com/en)

If a chance to compete in one of the loveliest capitals on the Baltic Sea sounds appeal-

ing, here's a suggestion: treat yourself to a sauna experience, for which the country is famous.

One fine choice is the authentic manor house, Mazmežotnes Muiža, a 75-minute drive from Riga. Spend the night in a hut, cottage, or lord's house. (See: Mamezotnes.lv)

Located in Rundāle, the nearby palace of the same name—the largest and most famous in Latvia (see: Rundalepalace.com)—is a must-see.—*IL correspondent Tricia Pimental.*

Europe's Bike Lane Network

Whether you're an avid long-distance road cyclist or enthusiastic amateur looking for a nice place for a Sunday bike ride, you can take advantage of EuroVelo, a network of high-quality bike trails crisscrossing the continent put together by the European Cyclists' Federation.

There are currently 16 routes covering a distance of 28,000 miles, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Black Sea, and from the Mediterranean Sea to the Bering Sea. When complete later this

year, a total of more than 43,000 miles of trails will exist in Spain, France, Greece, Italy, England, Hungary, and Norway, among other European countries.

You can hug Spain's Mediterranean coast...or traverse the entire sea from the Straits of Gibraltar to Athens. The Scandinavian routes are best done in summer. And the Via Roma Francigena route shadows the old Roman road from London to Rome. For details, go to EuroVelo.com —*IL Editor Jason Holland.*

DID YOU KNOW? The Pan-American Highway network stretches some 30,000 miles, crossing between two continents at Panama City's Centennial Bridge. Read more on Panama at IntLiving.com/Panama