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El Charco is a much-loved quiet space above the vibrant city.

Up in the Hills of San Miguel

The enchanting Spanish colonial town of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, can be a bit frenetic during popular festivals. No worries. When visiting San Miguel, it's easy to escape to nature. A five- to 10-minute taxi ride from Centro you'll find the gorgeous, tranquil El Charco del Ingenio botanical garden. This non-profit 220-acre conservation area is near to town but feels a world away.

Within the park you'll find diverse species of cacti and succulents along with trees and flowers, native and migratory birds, and natural wildlife.

The park is divided into three distinct zones: dry chaparral, canyon, and wetlands. Migratory birds congregate on several small islands within the reservoir. Well-maintained trails lead you past a reservoir, a dam, several canyon lookouts,

a water mill and aqueduct ruins, ponds, and waterfalls. The upper and lower trails meander through the three zones. There's even a natural amphitheater where concerts are held.

Most people can comfortably hike the entire park within one or two hours. Don't miss the elevated views the upper trail provides of the canyon and pools, and if you

"It's near to town, but feels a world away."

hike to the trail's end—Route 10 on the trail map—you'll be rewarded with an expansive birds' eye view of San Miguel below. You can also stroll through the Conservatory of Mexican

Plants to learn about the area's indigenous flora. The park's prize collection of rare and endangered cacti and succulent plants is a key feature.

Entry is 50 pesos (about \$2). Hiking and birding tours, led by naturalists, are offered weekly.—*Ann Kuffner.*

Celebrating Mushrooms in Portugal

Each November on an ancient hilltop in central Portugal, villagers in Alcaide gather to celebrate Míscaros, a three-day festival named for a wild mushroom native to the slopes of the Serra da Gardunha mountain range.

Festivities include a guided mushroom hunt, cooking demonstrations, and live music. In preparation for the festival,

backyards, sheds, and garages are cleaned out, to be transformed into shops selling handicrafts and local delicacies. Others morph into improvised eateries serving mushroom soup, mushroom tarts, and mushroom risotto.

Wash it all down with the sour cherry liqueur, *ginja*, for an authentic taste of the Portuguese highlands.—*Tricia Pimental.*

Sri Lanka's Elephant Villa

If you've ever wanted to rent out an elephant for a night, you are in luck. The Kumbuk River Resort in Sri Lanka rents out one of the world's most unusual villas. It's a 40-foot-tall, two-story elephant-shaped villa made entirely out of wood and straw. The elephant has modern amenities, including electricity, air conditioning, a bathroom with hot water, and a plunge pool. The ground floor is built for relaxing around the pool and dining in the open-air lounge. The two bedrooms are upstairs along with a deck.

Prices start at \$160 per night (for two people), which includes breakfast. The elephant can, however, accommodate up to 10 guests. It is built on 16 acres of forest adjacent to the Yala National Park, the best place in the country to see leopards.

The onsite restaurant uses local produce and traditional methods to cook regional cuisine.

While you're there, you can take guided meditation classes, dip into a mud bath, or enjoy an Ayurvedic wellness package.—*Kirsten Raccuia.*

New Sights in Pompeii

While recent events have put the brakes on any visits to Italy, the startlingly preserved archaeological site of Pompeii is primed for the resumption of activities with a new exhibit. Visitors to Pompeii will now be able to tour the House of the Orchard, now that extensive renovations are complete.

The dwelling was built in an atrium style with a courtyard garden behind, but the attraction is the richly frescoed rooms recreating a garden. The exacting details depict a variety of fruit

trees (hence the house's name), along with birds flitting among the greenery.

This opening comes after the famed archaeological site's announcement of a new find: a room painted with fighting gladiators in action, the only one of its kind found so far. It's thought to be part of a tavern frequented by the famous fighters. Unfortunately for visitors, it is located in Regio V, an area still under excavation and not open to the public.—*Valerie Fortney-Schneider.*

DID YOU KNOW? Mexico City is built over an underground lake, the original site of the Aztec city, Tenochtitlan. As a result, parts of the modern city are subsiding at a faster rate than Venice in Italy.

Living the Semi-Retirement Dream in Penang, Malaysia

Kirsten Raccuia

To realize their dream of living overseas, Lynn O'Brien and Kiernan Bowles assumed, as many people do, that they'd have to choose between waiting until full retirement age at 65 or leaving their jobs early and sacrificing years of additional income. They never considered that there might be a third choice, an alternative increasingly available to today's pre-retirees: continuing their roles from abroad, on their own terms.

Before retiring to Penang, Malaysia in 2018, Lynn and Kiernan, who goes by KB, were no strangers to living in sunny, tropical climates. They met in St. Thomas and later moved to Key West, Puerto Rico, and Grand Cayman for work.

In 2008, the couple settled in Florida, where they intended to finish out their careers. During a decade in the Sunshine State, they became successful sales reps for one of the leading retirement communities in the country. Working as independent contractors, they sold hundreds of retirement homes.

Still, the dream of moving overseas was never far from their thoughts. In 2017, they went on a fact-finding mission to an *IL* conference in Phoenix and learned, much to their surprise, that they had saved enough to make their move happen immediately. "It was a big leap mentally for us because we didn't think it would be possible so soon. We thought it would be quite a ways in the future," says Lynn.

The couple enjoyed their work but were ready to start a new chapter, so they took the decision on the spot to go for it. The conference then took on a whole new dimension for them, evolving into an urgent mission to identify their perfect overseas destination and make their move happen as soon as possible.

Having explored much of the Caribbean during their professional lives, they wanted to try a more distant, exotic location while they were still young. "Then, if we needed or wanted to move closer later on, it would be easier," says Lynn.

Initially, they favored Thailand for its rich culture, beautiful beaches, and affordability. Their eventual destination of Penang, a stunning tropical island off the west coast of peninsular Malaysia, wasn't on their radar until they learned about the Malaysia My 2nd Home (MM2H) program, which provides a 10-year, renewable visa to foreign citizens who meet certain conditions, including demonstrating a monthly income of 10,000 Malaysian ringgit (RM) (\$2,300) and depositing RM150,000 (\$34,600) into a Malaysian bank account.

"We figured that even if we didn't use the MM2H or live in Malaysia, the interest rates on the deposit are better than in the U.S.," says KB.

Then, just as they were planning to retire and move to Penang, the sales agency they represented began offering a new partnership program that allows for remote working. Lynn and KB, it turns out, were far from alone in their desire for greater work/life flexibility, so the



Dreamy sea views and gloriously warm weather are part of Lynn and KB's daily life now.

company rolled out the new program in a bid to retain its most experienced reps. The timing was perfect, offering them a way to continue their careers, part-time, from Penang.

"Customers reach out to us by email, and we gather information on how to serve their needs. We then pass this along to our partners so they can do the hands-on work," says Lynn. "Referrals are a huge part of our business, so we stay active. We spent 10 years developing relationships with our buyers. Now, we continue to nurture these relationships from abroad.

"We don't make the same kind of money we used to, but we don't do nearly as much work, and the cost of living here in Penang is so much lower, it doesn't matter," she adds.

With complete control of their schedules, Lynn and KB get to do all the things they never had time for back in Florida. When they first arrived, they joined the Penang Sports Club, which boasts facilities for everything from

tennis and racquetball to diving and yoga. Lynn, a keen tennis player, now enjoys weekly games with new friends she's made at the club, while avid golfer KB plays bi-weekly rounds at different golf courses on Penang Island and the nearby mainland. In fact, the couple say they've never had better social lives.

"The close-knit community is one of the things we love most about our lives here," says Lynn. "We are always out and about doing something. There is a great social scene. Music, quiz nights, theater, comedy, we do it all. We moved here on a Monday, and by Thursday it already felt like we'd been here six months."

Looking back today, Lynn and KB, now both 63, say the oversight they made back in their full-time working days was adhering to an outmoded view of retirement.

"Nowadays retirement doesn't have to mean that you stop working completely... it's often more of a transition. And during that transition you can find the freedom to live where you want while having an income," says Lynn. "As we're all learning at the moment, so much of our work can be done from anywhere. So, look at all of your options. Retirement age isn't written in stone anymore." ■

"Live where you want while having an income."