

Getting In: Visas, Residency and Work Permits



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Only a tiny percentage of Americans who leave make it all the way to foreign citizenship. It's possible to live your entire lifetime abroad and never become more than a guest of your adopted country. Even if citizenship is your goal, and even if you can place yourself into one of those fast-track categories, you're still going to enter on a visa, and often you're going to have to establish years of legal residency before you're sworn in and given your new passport. And certainly, if you're only planning a few-month reconnaissance trip to your new homeland, or just want to take an short "America break" for a year or so, the visa game is all you need to know.

Although the word visa is commonly used generically to refer to all documents that govern your stay in the country, in some places a visa merely allows you to cross the border and enter the country. To remain there for any realistic length of time, non-citizens must have a residency permit. These are often coupled with the visa. Other times, they must be applied for separately and in different places (one, say, at the consulate in the U.S. and the other at a police station in your new country). Some are rubber-stamped into your passport, others are affixed with a sticker or issued as a separate document. Each government has devised its own diabolically confusing system by which visas can either have names, letters or numbers or some combination of all three. Some are given out freely, with only the barest formalities, others more formally. Countries tend to be like country clubs and the particularly affluent and desirable ones are picky about who they let in, while other nations, usually poorer, Third World countries, have a much more open-door policy. You must get the specific requirements for your particular visa from the consulate of the country concerned and they can change like the seasons. Rules can often be long and complicated and while Canada and the U.K., for instance, have moved much of the immigration and residency process to the internet, you will most likely wait in lots of lines and in some cases be better off hiring an attorney.

Visas: What Are They Good For?

Generally, your visa has three important components:

Length of Stay: How long you are allowed to remain in the country. You can be issued a three-day transit visa, good for simply crossing the country on your way to somewhere else, or one that's good for the rest of your life.

Prohibited Activities: This usually means work. Sometimes no employment is allowed. Other times, you are allowed to work in a specific industry or at a specific place of employ. Other common restrictions include the ability to take advantage of social services, buy property, invest in the stock market and even get a bank account.

Renewability/Changeability: How many times can your visa can be extended, if at all? Can you apply for a different class of visa while you hold your current one? Renewable visas are the surest path to permanent residency and citizenship.

Important Note:

Not all visas are issued within the destination country. Some must be applied for in advance at an embassy or consul and still others can only be issued while you're still in your home country. Be sure you know the terms before you leave. Having to return to the United States just to stay in Spain, which is what you will probably have to do if you arrive on a tourist visa and want to change your status, makes for a pretty significant detour. At the very least, you will have to leave the country or the region before your new paperwork is sorted out.

Applications for visas can require a host of documents:

Police Report: Because most countries are not interested in accepting criminals, particularly those on the lam, you will be asked to present yourself at your local police precinct and request a document which states that you're not wanted for any crimes in the United States. The document will also list your police record, if any. In some cases, you're required to get this from the FBI, a process which involves being fingerprinted and having the results sent to Washington D.C. before a letter is issued clearing your name.

AIDS Test: More countries are requiring a certificate stating that you have recently (usually within the past six months) taken an AIDS test and have been found to be HIV-negative.

Evidence of Sufficient Funds: Nobody needs another hungry mouth. Governments will want to see bank statements or other documents that demonstrate you have enough funds or income to live on for the specified period of the visa, usually calculated at slightly above the local minimum wage. In the lands of wholesale labor exploitation, checking account balances of a few hundred dollars more than covers it.

Vaccinations: Unless you've traveled through some infested area, which wouldn't be the case if you are coming from the U.S., you do not need vaccinations to travel anywhere on the planet, although they are recommended before you go to parts of Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and South America. To get the latest on what diseases infest your destination and what shots to get, you can consult the Center for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov/travel or the State Department at www.state.gov

Depending on what kind of residency or citizenship status you are seeking, birth certificates, marriage licenses, separation agreement, divorce decrees, and death certificates might all be required. Start collecting those today. There will be applications to fill out, photos to submit and finally, money: except for most tourist class visas, you will be Euro'd and Yen'd to death. In Cambodia, they might be as cheap as \$20, while a Swiss residency permit goes for €1500. Costs can easily reach into the thousands of dollars before you reach permanent residency or citizenship. You'll need to factor those into your overall budget.

Field Guide to Common Visas

Visas come in all shapes and sizes. Visas granted to refugees don't apply to the U.S. expat, although the way things are going, that may change. The Transit Visa (allowing you to cross a country's territory on your way to somewhere else), or Medical Visa (allowing you to visit for the purposes of medical treatment), are too specific to bother considering. Most potential expats will

want to consider the following types of visas. Again, names, terms and availability vary widely from country to country.

Permanent Resident: The equivalent of the U.S. Resident Alien or “Green Card,” the Permanent Resident visa allows you to do almost anything a citizen can do except vote and travel under that nation’s passport. After a given number of years, you can usually qualify for citizenship. The rules for obtaining permanent residency don’t veer too far from for rules for citizenship.

Temporary Resident/Settlement/Long-Stay Visa: Often a stepping-stone to permanent residency, this sort of visa has a specific designation (three, five, 10 years) and can come with none, some or all of the restrictions placed on other visas.

The following visas are sometimes issued on their own and other times are used as a consideration for offering one of the residency permits outlined above:

Relative Visa: In the interest of keeping families together, governments often make allowances for family members of citizens or legal residents to come over and stay. Sometimes these require that you actually live with your family or that your family pledge to support you while you are in the country.

Marriage Visa: Marry a citizen or a permanent resident and you’re granted one of these, usually on your way to permanent residency. In countries like New Zealand, these privileges extend even to finances and domestic partners. Without having to convince someone to go through an official marriage ceremony, well, let’s just say that this visa angle has a lot of possibilities.

Pension/Retirement Visas: The *Pensionado*, as most people know it, is how countries attract people who will spend money, won’t make trouble, and won’t enter the job market. If you can prove you have a guaranteed income, usually in the form of some kind of pension (in Costa Rica, \$600 a month; in Thailand, approximately \$1,500), and are over a specified age (as low as 45, as high as 60), this is the option best worth taking. Often, your Social Security benefits are enough. Though also aimed at retirees, the *rentista* visa offers similar terms with no minimum age limit. In Mexico and Argentina, for instance, anyone who can provide evidence of a guaranteed income of \$1000 a month (plus \$500 for each additional family member), gets you a visa.

Investment Visas: Few countries like to discourage capital investment in their economies, and provisions for individuals to take up residence there are

much facilitated if they are willing to put their money where their expat mouth is. Vanuatu's five-year residency visa is yours with an investment of around \$45,000. In Australia, you wouldn't get by without sinking at least \$250,000 into the national business economy. And the U.K. would like to see you pony up something closer to a half million if you're actually going to be working in your business, \$1.5 million if you're just going to sink money into the country and do nothing else ("passive investment"). In the low-rent countries of Latin America and Southeast Asia such visas are within middle-class means, especially since in many cases, real estate qualifies as an investment. Panama will allow you in if you simply deposit \$100,000 in a savings account. If your politics is as green as your bank account, investing a mere \$40,000 in rainforest reforestation there (\$100,000 in Costa Rica) gets you in, too.

Working With Your Visa

Work Permit: Few nations have any incentive to allow foreigners to take jobs that could possibly go to locals. Typically, you have to beg, cajole or otherwise convince a local employer to sponsor you. That means he vouches that he couldn't find a local qualified candidate. Usually, the government's ministry of labor or equivalent bureau must approve the request. While this works better with technical type jobs (and of course, English teaching, where the school can be expected to handle the details for you) but not quite so well if you just want to wash dishes. Often you're restricted to one location, one job, one company. If you're fired, and unless your visa doesn't restrict you seeking other employment, you're back to square one. Others even allow your husband or wife to work, too. In almost all cases, a permanent residency allows you the right to seek employment just like any other citizen. Spousal visas, too, often allow unrestricted employment. For further information on work issues, see Jobs Chapter, page 70.)

Overseas Employee Visa: If a U.S. company sends you to work at the São Paulo office, often you'll get one of these from the government and moving expenses from your firm.

Business Visa: Sometimes these are issued to businessmen and aren't much different from ordinary tourist visas. Others are geared toward people who will stay and conduct business for stays of one to five years. People who export local goods, buy and sell real estate or work in the tourist trade often operate under one of these. In many countries, it's possible to set up an

empty holding company and get one. Such places usually generate armies of immigration attorneys and consultants who charge a fee to process the pro-forma paperwork.

Self-Employment Visa: Freelancers who can take their game overseas usually aim for one of these. You'll usually be asked to present documents—bank statements, business invoices, etc.—that you really have to have a career and that it earns you income so that you won't be hitting up the local job market.

Student Visas: They're recognized almost everywhere there are universities. They usually expire when your studies do. Canada and Australia allow you to hold a part-time job. The U.K. offers employment schemes for students in their "gap year" before college and some even allow employment for up to two years after graduation.

Volunteer Visa: If you're working on a humanitarian or even missionary program or for recognized organizations, you will probably be issued one of these, usually through the organization you work for. While these don't allow you to take employment, anyone who wants to make a career of helping the less fortunate of the world will find this a valuable stepping-stone—as this is how all the contacts are made.

Artist/Performer Visa: For the struggling creative geniuses so they can contribute something to the local color and culture.

Journalist/Media Visa: Freelancers can try it, but it works better if you have an accredited media organization behind you.

Religious Visa: If you're willing to spread the Good News (usually through some established evangelical organization), bring your Bible and get your visa. This is also good if you want to retreat to an overseas monastery for a couple years.

Instructor or Academic Visa: For English teachers and college professors. It's a pretty cushy way to go. Austria even offers a special legal mechanism whereby prominent academics can be granted citizenship.

Needed Skill Visa: This allows you to surf the job market like any other local. The catch is, you have to match certain designated certain skills and occupations that the government would like to attract. Canada, New Zealand and Australia post their current needs on their websites.

Canada: www.cic.gc.ca

Australia: www.immi.gov.au

NZ: www.govt.nz

Working Holiday/Travel and Working Visa: Ireland, U.K., Australia, and Canada all offer some kind of short-term work scheme for recent college grads under the age of 30. Ireland gives you a stingy four months; Canada and New Zealand give you a year. The U.K. has a slightly different “scheme,” as they call it, which lets you work for six months. This time allows you to hook up the connects to stay on more permanently. For Americans, these visas are managed through a private foundation, usually BUNAC (www.bunac.com), which for less than \$300 will take care of all the paperwork for you. You’ll arrive in country with permit in hand, but finding an actual job is up to you.

Tourist Visa: This is the low rung on the visa pole. Since almost all countries depend to some degree on tourism, they tend to be given out like candy, usually free, with few hassles, especially to Americans, though they are usually loaded with restrictions, the primary one being that you have to leave when it expires. Many countries don’t even require Americans to have visas for short stays of 30 or even sometimes as many as 90 days. Often tourist visas cannot be renewed and many require that you leave the country before you can return. Many people manage just fine, either by overstaying and paying the fine, or making the (usually) three-month “visa run.” This means stepping over the closest border just before your visa expires, then getting it stamped on the way back. In Thailand, visa buses make daily trips to the Cambodian border and back, while twilight operations, typical in many Third World countries, actually allow the lazy to have someone else ferry your passport to the border and back. Be warned: letting your passport out of your sight and control is risky business. U.S. passports fetch big ducats on the black market.

In the *Schengen* countries of Europe (see page 51), new laws require that tourists leave every 90 days and must stay away for an equal amount of time. This makes a long stay tricky but not impossible.

How'd You Get Your Visa?

Jim Cotner

Permanent Business Visa Baja California, Mexico

There are many ways of becoming a legal resident in Mexico, some easy, some difficult. How I did it was I formed a corporation called Chongo Bravo. You go to a Notary Public or Notario Publico as it's called here. A Notario in Mexico is a lawyer that's been granted by the state the function of certifying business deals. And their seal gives these deals official approval. They also do property titles, as well. So you get one of these Notario Publicos to file the paperwork with the government of Mexico for a permit to open up a foreign business. Then you can start a 100% foreign-owned business in Mexico as long as they are not fishing concerns or various extraction industries like oil, but in all those other things like real estate property, trade or manufacturing, retail or anything else you can imagine, a 100% foreign-owned company is A-OK. It's been this way since 1992.

The Notario Publico gets approximately \$1000 to set this corporation up. It comes in little parts, you know, fees here and there. Then after about a month, you come back to the Notario and you enter the country with a visa—a regular tourist visa, usually—and you sign the corporation into law.

You assign yourself President in the articles of the corporate constitution and if you come in with a partner, you can grant that partner full Power of Attorney so they can do any activity on the corporation's behalf.

Now, here is the trick. In order to engage in any business activity in Mexico you have to already have a business visa or you have to be a Mexican citizen. In order for this plan to work, the business has to request that the government issue the company's president or any other employee, for that matter, a business visa. So how does an American get around this Catch-22? What you do is grant a Mexican accountant (many of whom specialize in this sort of thing) the rights to perform certain duties within your corporation. One of those duties is to file on your behalf the request for a permanent business visa, called an FM3, which must be renewed annually. It looks like a passport.

The accountant submits the paperwork to the Mexican IRS which they call the Hacienda and to the Bureau of Immigration. Expect to pay an additional \$500–\$1000 for this service.

With that visa you get your Mexican driver's license and with that you can engage in all the other activities as a Mexican citizen (including renewing your own visa) besides voting and holding a Mexican passport. So in essence the company is legally regarded as a Mexican citizen; they call it a *persona morale*, a moral entity.

You have to forego your rights to sue in U.S. court. You have to pay taxes, but for that you get an accountant. The accountant has to file every month for this Mexican corporation (I pay around \$50 a month for this service. Others can try and do it alone, if they feel bold enough). They just put in zeros. Zero income and zero expenses and then every year you have to file an annual report, but it's kind of like an EZ form. And then you have to file the same form with the Office of Foreign Affairs or Foreign Businesses. Potentially, after two or three years, you have to show that you are conducting business. This could be something like you say the place that you purchased or rented was leased to an American for three months in holiday season, and they gave you cash and you spent cash. The government is not what you'd call aggressive about looking into these things, so in reality you don't actually have to earn any income. You just have to create this shell company and you're in.

Of course, you can conduct real business, which I intend to do. Through Chango Bravo, I purchased some land in Baja, and I will soon develop it into a surf camp.

Jennifer Crawford

Three-year residence permit Hamburg, Germany

I just got a three-year residence permit based on a little-known U.S.-Germany treaty from 1954 that allows Americans to receive the same status as Germans when they are opening a "branch office" in Germany. This treaty is titled "Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation Between The United States of America and the Federal Republic of Germany." It was helpful to bring a copy of the treaty (in German) to the immigration office, as the agents assisting us were not familiar with this document. This, in effect, waives the minimum

foreign investment requirement of one million EUR (among other hurdles). I simply had to provide a copy of my CPA license, a business card from my U.S. office, and a copy of my university degree. I registered with the German self-employment office, provided this document to German immigration, and voilà: a three-year residence permit.

Bud Smith

Permanent resident

Chiriqui, Panama

In Panama there are many expatriates living full-time on tourist visas because the country has a relatively liberal policy on the subject. U.S. tourist visas are easily obtained and generally available for 90 days. After 90 days in country, renewing this visa by law requires only a three-day vacation across the border into another country, the favorite being Costa Rica which has conveniently located many nice little beach towns and mini-resorts along both coasts within a few hours of the border for this purpose. Theoretically there is a limit to how many times you can do this, but no one seems to have reached the limit yet unless they have other bones to pick with the Panamanian government. In this case they may never be allowed back in the country once they leave, and they may not know this until they attempt to return. But as long as you're a not a troublemaker, you are welcome back in Panama for three months after an absence of 72 hours.

What most people don't realize is that the laws are, shall we say, much more flexible in Latin America (for example) than in most of the developed world. If you have some cash, almost anything can be made to happen if you take your time and play your cards right. In Panama your passport can be made to appear, by customs officials at the border, to show that you have been out of the country for the required 72 hours for an illegal fee of about \$40 which is much less than it is going to cost you to spend three days in Costa Rica. But making this work is a technique that needs to be learned with help and some experience. If you are settling here without cultural familiarity then you will need to play the game by the rules for a while until you learn how the game is played which is ultimately the key to all success.

Name Withheld By Request

Residence Visa

San Jose, Costa Rica

In Costa Rica, you have to leave the country every 90 days. If you go back to the States, they'll give you some leeway, so you can leave a little after three months, but you jump to Nicaragua or Panama or someplace like that, you have to leave in three months because they won't let you back in. They are very strict.

There are legitimate agencies here that can help you get your residency, however, I'm talking about someone, a guy, coming up to you and saying, "I can hook you up with a residency."

I'm sure there have been cases where it hasn't worked, but I haven't heard of any. I don't have to go to an agency because I've been approached by someone else. Yeah, it's really very under the table.

Bill

Residence Visa

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

They have what they call a residence visa that the company pays for and is sorted through them. It's an interesting system because you usually have to work for the employer before a year and if you want to change you have to have a "no objection letter." If you do not have this, your company can place a ban on you and you will be forced to leave the UAE for six months. I have changed employers and most are pretty flexible with this.

As for citizenship in this country, you are not eligible unless you stay for 20 years and speak Arabic. For me, it's not really an issue.

Joyce Glasser

Work Permit

London, U.K.

I got my work permit through my first employer. Eventually. My employer being a small business, he told me he would take care of it and my second month here, my boss and I were returning from a day's work in Paris and I was stopped at customs at the airport, pulled into a little waiting room with several Eastern European-looking weirdos and given a plane ticket home within

three days. It was a Thursday. I pulled out an opera ticket I had in my wallet for Saturday night (the days when I could afford opera) and begged the customs officer to let me stay long enough to see the opera. He looked at the price and agreed. On Friday I went into my office and threatened to sue my boss unless he did something fast. He used all his contacts and by 5 p.m. Friday, my work permit was on its way.

Eight years later, I paid a couple of hundred pounds and applied for a passport. One has to go to Croydon and queue in line forever and then wait about 18 months, but after writing three nasty notes to the passport office, one day in 1999 it arrived.

Sam Coleman

Self-Employment Permit Amsterdam, Holland

Many times the best way to get yourself established abroad is to start your own company. Most countries will recognize you as a single person business or a sole entrepreneur or whatever they call it. That's a good way to get established. Then you can say, "I got X amount in the bank." And it's almost always under \$5000. It's different if you're incorporated and have limited liability, then you're really going to have some money there. But if you accept full liability, they'll accept that and you can have residency-based ownership of the company. It's changing and they're trying to close those loopholes. But you can still do it. That's what I did.

Macaela Flanagan

Family Visa, "Partnership" Type Wellington, New Zealand

I am in the final stages of securing my third visa, which will be valid for a further two years. During this time I will meet the requirements for residency and plan on applying so I can always leave the country and come back without hassle.

My original working holiday visa I got through BUNAC, an organization that helps young people travel to other countries for up to a year. Now I am dating a New Zealander, whom I met soon after arriving here. I applied through the "family stream" visa so he wrote a letter of support for our relationship,

validating our life together. I included photos, joint bank account statements, our tenancy agreement, bills with both of our names on them, etc.

I had a job where the management loved me. They wanted to keep me on and wrote letters on my behalf.

I called the New Zealand Immigration hotline here several times with the same question and got several different answers. I found it's just best to go in, wait in the huge lines, and talk to someone. They are helpful and knowledgeable, and don't seem bored with answering your questions, even if they've answered it 100 times. Talking to people face to face has made my applications successful. And I always give myself spare time in case something takes longer than planned.

Unfortunately, the only thing I have needed from the U.S. government is a copy of my police record and they have been less than helpful.

David Herrick

Tourist Visa

Phuket, Thailand

I hold a tourist visa for Thailand. They are very easy to obtain. Corrupt officials were the norm when I first arrived a few years back, but not anymore, so I actually have to follow procedure and leave the country every 30 days. Burma is the closest border to Phuket, so I usually go there.

The Expat Outlaw: Living Gray or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the E.U.

By Michael Levitin

Whenever I pass through customs these days I feel a gnawing sensation. One false move and the European dream is dead. But I don't have a choice, so I step up to Euro Man who is thirsty and gray-faced in his tight administrator's outfit and I hand him my small blue booklet with the eagle on the cover. Euro Man asks questions such as how long I plan to stay and what will I be doing. "One month, tourism," I lie.

He grunts, hands the passport back and waves me forward.

I've been living in Europe for more than two years and I haven't lifted a finger to make myself legal. That's not to say I've grossly violated the law—unless you call overstaying my traveler's visa by about 20 months a crime. The gray life—meaning you are here and at the same time, officially, not here—is not only possible, but practical and fun. Many people do it. And with a combination of smarts, luck—and, I like to fantasize, good looks and an honest smile when you need one—you're likely to get away with it.

Shortly after I arrived in Prague in the winter of 2003, lacking a TOEFL certificate and any formal training, I got hired teaching a semester of English at a public high school and coaching marketing executives in conversation at the Czech Republic's largest supermarket chain. All the work paid cash under the table. Anyone new to Prague can get gigs like these—as well as decent-paying, private English lessons—by simply meeting other Americans and foreigners who are doing the same thing, and sharing their contacts.

For me, that meant hanging out at English-language bookstores like Shakespeare & Sons and The Globe. For others it might mean frequenting expat clubs like Radost or Metropolis, or downtown cafés such as the Tulip or the one-time Kafka haunt, Montmartre. Foreigners are constantly moving into and out of the city, which makes the turnover rate for English teachers high.

I adopted a gray lifestyle not only because it fit the brooding, depressed and claustrophobic mood in Prague, but because of the unofficial way I drifted into the city's life, phantom-like, able to earn a living and even to start a magazine, without a single official ever knowing I was there. It's easy

to ignore the bureaucracy in eastern, former-Soviet countries because despite their recent entry into the European Union, many of western Europe's foreigner restrictions, work regulations and other residency formalities haven't yet caught on. Renting a flat in Prague involved next to nothing: I looked online, visited an apartment and moved in. No contract, no deposit. The guy renting me the room was a chef from New Mexico. He'd been living gray in Prague, going from one cash-paid job to the next, for more than 10 years.

I never opened a bank account. I never registered with the Czech police or with the U.S. embassy the way Americans abroad are supposed to, because I didn't want the hassle of being on anyone's list—my government's or theirs. The only time I had to think fast was when my three-month entry stamp was about to expire—a dilemma I solved by taking a long weekend trip to Paris and getting stamped for another three months on my way back in. If you're lazy, a short trip to Germany (Dresden is two hours away), Austria or Slovakia accomplishes the same. I lived as a border-hopper, clandestine and off of everyone's map, for eight months until Prague bored and saddened me and, like many expats who had been there and done that, I left.

Things got trickier in the E.U. proper. After a bit of traveling, I ended up in Barcelona. I was still living gray, but settling anywhere in Spain—where “immigration problems” are the stuff of daily newspaper articles and political chatter—is no Prague waltz. There's paperwork galore and the official machinery makes it harder every day. I couldn't legally sign an apartment lease without proof of residency in the country. How do I get a temporary residency permit? I need a work contract from a company that has agreed to hire me. How do I receive a work contract and get hired? I need to show a residency permit. Catch-22.

As a freelance journalist selling my work to newspapers and magazines back in the U.S., I didn't need the Spanish government's permission to work. But I did need a place to live. Most renters want to see that you have a local bank—preferably with lots of cash in the account—and they usually ask for your parents or your company to sign a guarantee in case you fail on your monthly payments. I had none of those things. But a friend's real estate-owning aunt rented me a studio apartment 50 yards from the beach and didn't require me to fully fill out the lease forms. I paid 300 euros a month and lived in the Barcelona, a network of narrow, dank alleyways where the smell of

frying fish and gambas filled the air and the hoarse shouts of gypsy women and squabbles between Andalusian families echoed in the street below my window. I loved it.

With my housing contract, life in Europe took on a semblance of legality. I opened a bank account. I set up a cell phone contract. I did everything that a regular Barcelonense is authorized to do. But there was still one major hang-up: the *Schengen* laws. *Schengen* is the name of a tiny village in Luxembourg where five European countries met to sign an agreement in 1985 allowing all people who are temporarily or permanently legal in Europe (i.e., nationals, tourists, potential terrorists, and just about anyone) to travel freely across borders without having to show their passports. In 1997, the *Schengen* zone expanded to include 13 countries—all but two of the then-E.U. member states, Great Britain and Ireland. The message was: once you're in Europe, you're in (and don't worry because nobody's going to check you). But unlike in Prague, where all I had to do was cross the border for a day in order to renew my passport stamp for three months, the new laws stipulated that when my three months were up in Spain, I would be forced to leave the zone for an equal three months. After that I could return for three months, then I must leave again for three months, and so on for a maximum of six months in any year spent within the *Schengen* bloc.

The upside of the deal is the "big external border" of Europe, which allows me to take flights all over the continent—from Berlin to Naples, Paris to Lisbon—without ever having to get my passport stamped. I've drifted through a half dozen western European countries in the last year and haven't had a dangerous run-in. Not only that, but without the stamps showing where I've been and when I've been there—and until the *Schengen* Information System, or SIS, gets as tough as its American surveillance counterpart—Euro Man will have a hard time not only catching me, but bringing a case against me with evidence that I have, indeed, been living fully outside the law.

Most of the Americans I knew in Barcelona didn't bother applying for work or residency papers either. Like me, they figured that the application itself would draw more attention to their illegal residence than simply staying illegal and out of view. Basically, as long as you find an apartment to rent informally (without an official contract) and have a way of making money that doesn't require a company contract either, slipping under the Euro radar isn't

so difficult. If you're careful and you don't do something stupid—like get caught with drugs, have a traffic accident or commit some other offense that calls attention to yourself—you could hypothetically stay in Europe forever, bouncing around from place to place. While I freelanced and made American cash, my friends in Barcelona taught English, dance and yoga, played music, worked as nannies, led pub crawls, gave bike tours, and scrambled together bucks in a number of other creative ways. Like me, they had figured out that there's the official world—the one with visa documents and bank forms, with residency permits and work papers, with apartment contracts and *Schengen* expiration dates—and there's the world we live in. For those in the Gray Generation abroad, it's all about finding the quickest and least official way of going where and getting what you want.

At the same time, living gray still means taking care of some of the day-to-day details—like health insurance—in a discreet but professional way. The last thing you want is to get ill or have an accident. In Europe everyone's covered: it's called the social safety net. But for non-Europeans, even a brief hospital stay could hit you with a stiff bill while exposing your identity—which virtually guarantees your expulsion from the continent. As an American, therefore, if you're going to hide out abroad and not fuss with the paperwork of becoming legal, I recommend getting an easy, affordable emergency health care package with a European company—like Bupa International, for example, a British provider that charges about \$100 a month.

Now I'm living in a third, sinfully hip European capital, Berlin. But in spite of the bureaucratic intimidation—and the fact that most Americans and other foreigners around me have, in this case, gone through the process of obtaining temporary residency permits allowing them to stay legally for up to one year—I have refused to haul myself out from the shadows, and have not complied with a single rule. I remain someone who does not exist. And in order not to exist, I cannot fill out a form that will jeopardize my anonymity, such as the *Polizei Anmeldung*, the basic registration form everybody fills out at their local Berlin police station when they arrive, whether they're temporary or legal or not.

My Spanish girlfriend came to the rescue with her European citizenship which got her registered with the police and set up with temporary residence. She signed the apartment lease, got the bank account, and all the rest. Later on, I took a risk and covertly wrote in my name beside hers on the *Polizei*

Anmeldung, which allowed me to open a checking account of my own. Now, in appearances at least, I am a bank card holder and therefore as official as the next guy. I also received a student ID card for enrolling in a German language school, which means cheaper transportation, culture and entertainment—and another notch on the belt of my false legitimacy.

The rules for temporary residency aren't as strict here as they are in Spain, though, so if I had Berlin to do over again, I probably would have scrambled together some English teaching classes, presented my freelance work to the authorities to prove I had additional income (i.e., that I would not, like many Germans, live off the state) and hoped that the police issued me a three-month foreigner residency permit. That document alone is all you really need, because if you can continue proving that you have work, you can get the permit extended for an indefinite period—I know people here who have been doing it for years. But I also know that you can bypass the process altogether by finding cheap and informal apartment sublets/rentals online at sites such as www.studenten-wg.de; picking up short-term jobs in teaching, editing, (babysitting?) when you need them; and, as the number one rule for an expat living gray—keeping a low profile.

I suppose one of these days I'm going to have to get legit. But as long as I'm able to make a buck as a freelancer, the prospect of getting legal, taxpaying work in Europe doesn't have much appeal. And just remember, even if they catch you, you have one thing going for you: you're AMERICAN. That means that despite the vast numbers of the planet's population that either hates us or fears us—or both—as a nation, as individuals people in Europe (except for France) won't dump on Americans unless they have to. Your job, then, is to make sure you don't give them the chance.