

## Is It Any Better There? Choosing the Country That's Right For You

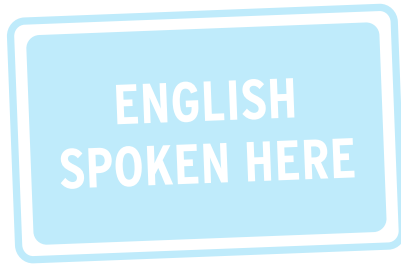
Asking “what’s the best country?” is a lot like asking whom you should marry. It all depends on what you like...and can live with. There are many variables that will influence your decision, beyond the ease (or difficulty) of entry and immigration requirements already discussed. Employment could be at the top of your list of considerations and lack of same could be a dealbreaker regardless of how much you love the place. Quality of life can mean different things to different people. Some prefer sandy beaches; others, gritty cities. Many consider a certain standard of roads, schools, and Internet connectivity to be crucial. Others might place a high value on the availability of familiar foods and products. Or you may be seeking to get as far away from all that as possible. Obviously, in many areas, from climate to culture, you might not necessarily be choosing a country so much as choosing a specific place—or type of place, anyway.

While few people would even go somewhere on vacation without getting an idea of what kind of climate to expect (if only to know what to pack), there are many who would move abroad without taking into consideration a constellation of other aspects that might impact their quality of life to an equal if not greater extent. You’re probably going to have to make some kind of prioritization and no doubt have to make sacrifices, as well. So while there are many nuances that make it impossible to completely “know before you go,” these are some things you might want to look into, certainly before you commit.

The following pages can offer only the slightest taste of the nearly infinite quantity and variety of information and data out there. Visiting the sites mentioned here will supply you with more expanded and detailed information. And if those don’t fully satisfy your insatiable hunger for knowledge, you’ll find a veritable buffet in the Resources section at the back of the book.

## Does Anyone Speak English? For Those Who’ll Never Learn

If you don’t or can’t make the effort to learn the local language, you limit your zone of comfort to large urban centers, tourist traps, and expat enclaves. You



risk alienation because you're constantly surrounded by conversation that you can't understand. You may need to run the letter from your gas company through Google Translate or constantly get friends, neighbors and often strangers to explain even the most mundane communication.

That is, of course, unless you happen to find yourself in one of these English-speaking nations:

Antigua	Gambia	Papua New Guinea
Australia	Ghana	Philippines
The Bahamas	Gibraltar	Seychelles
Bangladesh	India	Sierra Leone
Barbados	Ireland	South Africa
Belize	Jamaica	Sri Lanka
Bermuda	Kenya	Swaziland
Botswana	Lesotho	Tanzania
Brunei	Liberia	Trinidad and Tobago
Cameroon	Malawi	Uganda
Canada	Malta	United Kingdom
Cayman Islands	Mauritius	Zambia
Dominica	New Zealand	Zimbabwe
Fiji	Nigeria	

English is also so widely spoken in Holland, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Scandinavia (and to a lesser extent, Japan and South Korea), that you could probably survive well enough without language skills. Though pop culture, mass tourism (and the need to sell something to them) and the Internet all contribute to greater English penetration around the world (and the younger the person you encounter is, the more likely it would be that he or she speaks English), your degree of comfort deteriorates, especially as you move further from the developed world. Even if you've landed in an exotic corner of the linguisticstan, there's little excuse not to make an effort to learn the language of your adopted home. From local tutors, language meetups, to schools and multimedia home courses—not to mention McLanguage schools like Berlitz—you should find something that can suit your learning time and schedule. If you can, of course, start your education before you leave.

**Edna Vuong****Beijing, China**

You should probably know some Mandarin to live here. You don't have to know much to get by. I grew up speaking Cantonese and I took some Mandarin courses in university so I can get by pretty easily. I also know expats who just know numbers and street names and have no trouble. Chinese classes are also widely available and inexpensive.

**Marlane O'Neill****Narbonne, France**

I speak French, not perfectly and with an accent. My husband is learning to speak, he really doesn't speak yet. People are very nice to him about his English; they really seem to want to learn English! However not many people speak English in Narbonne as compared to, say, Paris.

So you really need to have some French. Most of the Americans and English people we know do speak at least some French, and many are fluent.

**Gary Lukatch****Budapest, Hungary**

Americans stay mostly within their small groups and rarely attempt to learn more than a few words of Hungarian. There is a large expat community here, from all over the world, who use English as a common language, plus a good-size British contingent. And, of course, Hungarians who speak English and want to keep improving their skills. Generally, it's pretty easy these days to get by, as more people here speak at least some English than did 10 years ago.

**Vina Rathbone****Buenos Aires, Argentina**

It would be fairly difficult to get by speaking only English, but indubitably manageable to a patient and creative communicator. There are many affordable Spanish classes. In general the population is patient and friendly with a non-native speaker, but many of them have difficulty with accents.

I speak the corrupted Castilian Rioplatense Spanish, which is unique only to Buenos Aires. It is essentially Spanish spoken with an Italian rhythm with a German accent and with the haughtiness of French.

Buenos Aires is a city of immigrants, mostly Europeans from the second World War, and this is very much inflected in the local language. I think it is much more

fun and dynamic to speak than general Spanish. Many people here also speak Italian. The local slang is called *lunfardo*, which is somewhat derived from Italian, and worth picking up.

### **Paul Schuble**

#### **Hyogo Prefecture, Japan**

While it definitely makes life a lot easier to be able to speak and read the local language, I've known people who have come here with zero knowledge of Japanese, made little or no effort to learn, and gotten by just fine. Fortunately for them, most Japanese do understand some degree of English and many people here are very accommodating.

### **Tyler Watts**

#### **Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam**

If you live in Saigon or Hanoi then you can get by quite easily without Vietnamese (particularly in certain downtown areas). Even in areas with large tourist flow there is sufficient English ability among local Vietnamese (Hue, Nha Trang, Dalat, Can Tho). As English is the required foreign language among students, even as low as first grade in the cities.

### **Scott**

#### **Riyadh, Saudi Arabia**

It is easy to get by on just English. Most here know very basic greetings or common shopping words. With the huge mix of nationalities in KSA, most people you will encounter will speak English. It is greatly appreciated, however, when a Westerner speaks (or makes the attempt to speak) Arabic.

### **Paul Tenney**

#### **Singapore**

Singapore is a former British colony and everyone here speaks English. The majority of the population is Chinese by descent and speaks Mandarin as their first language, but everyone is required to speak English in school growing up. The accents might seem a little funny to you at first and your accent might seem a little funny to everyone else, but there are no real language issues here.

## **Art F.**

### **Sihanoukville, Cambodia**

Many people that deal with expats and tourists speak at least some English. Many others speak French, a holdover from colonial days. My girlfriend speaks Khmer and this helps a lot.

## **Tinuola**

### **Prague, Czech Republic**

There are expats who have lived here for almost a decade and longer who speak very little Czech and they've survived. Of course, this is the case in Prague, not the rest of the country. In fact, the best way to quickly pick up the Czech language is to live outside of Prague. Without being fluent in Czech, making friends with the locals is a challenge. Many of my friends are other English-speaking expats, and some Czechs who are fluent in English.

## **Bryn Martin**

### **Lausanne, Switzerland**

Life for an American in Lausanne can be quite alienating. The language and social barrier is very difficult. Most Francophones definitely don't react like a Spanish-speaking person when you butcher their language. The Swiss Romande are also not renowned for their openness. I hear there is a saying about Switzerland that goes something along the lines of "The first time you enter a friend's house is when you carry their casket out." However, there are a lot of expats that you can get chummy with while they are around! Social life with expats can be great. If you learn French, social life can be really super.

## **The Shock Doctrine: A Word About Culture**

If you want to leave America but would rather everything else besides the government look and act pretty much the same, you'd head for:

### **Canada, Australia and New Zealand**

Being fully anglicized former British colonies (whose early settlers have to a greater or less extent, er, displaced the native population), you'll find the most similarities here—and as a result, they tend to be popular choices. Though you couldn't call it a carbon copy, Canada offers proximity along with familiarity—same architecture,

same products, even the same electrical outlets, and only the barest hint of an accent/dialect in the conversation around you. You could almost forget you're in another country—unless you want to visit a doctor or buy a handgun, that is. European society, particularly Western Europe and more so U.K. and Ireland (obviously), would still be comprehensible to most Americans. After that, things generally feel more alien (depending on your own background, of course). There's probably no way to avoid culture shock completely, nor are there many quick and easy cures. Culture pervades everything, from the way people greet each other to how they do business to how they find lifemates or bedmates. Patience, flexibility and a sincere effort to get to know and understand your neighbors, however, certainly couldn't hurt. As for how the local culture might mesh with your overall tastes and preferences, you're encouraged to read as much as you can about the places you are considering and ideally schedule an initial exploratory visit so you can feel it out for yourself.

## How Much Does It Cost? Bargain vs. Boutique

The young and single often fan out to where the rent is still cheap, but life is not quite so slow. However, urban areas are generally pricier than anywhere else. Conversely, fixed-income pensioners might want a place in the sun without paying resort prices. But be aware: the almighty dollar ain't buying what it used to buy. Its plummeting value is probably the biggest hurdle and hassle that anyone will face when contemplating a move abroad (that, and the ever-expanding no-fly list, that is). That's not to say that you can't finance a lifestyle on a fraction of what it would cost in the U.S., but the differences aren't what they used to be. Cheap, that is to say, has become a lot more relative. And unless you have some magic strategy to knock some fiscal sense into the Fed and Federal Reserve, you're going to have to resign yourself to that particular aspect being out of your control.

That said, if it's bargains you're after, your search would tend to be south, toward the countries of Latin America. Southeast Asia also beckons along with India. The eastern part of Europe (old Soviet Bloc countries) are generally cheaper than the Western European ones, offering affordable opportunities for sophisticated or bohemian urban living. China's cheap unless you want to

live in a major city (i.e., any of the ones you've actually heard of) in which case you'd probably have saved money staying home. Ditto, Russia. Tourist resorts are also more expensive than a plot in the middle of nowhere and often more than in a major city. Thanks to the high-paid labor attracted by their oil boom, the disparity between the cost of living in Luanda, Angola's capital, vs. the rest of the country is mind-boggling.

The prices one might pay for food, rent and transportation don't necessarily align with the relative price of consumer electronics and brand-name clothing so a lot depends on your lifestyle as well. Organizations such as Mercer keep track of costs of living, generally aimed at the transfer and per diem set and provide a lot of helpful data free on their website [www.mercer.com](http://www.mercer.com). Numbeo ([www.numbeo.com](http://www.numbeo.com)) operates a wiki-style cost-of-living database—everything from the rent cost of a three-bedroom flat in Chiang Mai to a loaf of bread in Prague—and compiles averages and rankings of consumer price, rent price and grocery price by city and country and even lets you compare a variety of costs between two cities/areas. Generally, you can look at a population's average income (how "rich" they are) and get an idea of whether the country is cheap or expensive to live in. These stats are as close as your local wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)) or to see the numbers crunched and weighted every which way, have a look at the IMF's ([www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org)) World Economic Outlook database.

### Income Per Capita: Richest Countries

Luxembourg	\$108,831.70	Austria	\$44,986.58
Norway	\$84,443.63	Finland	\$44,488.64
Qatar	\$76,167.85	Singapore	\$43,116.69
Switzerland	\$67,246.00	Japan	\$42,820.39
United Arab Emirates	\$59,716.85	Belgium	\$42,630.11
Denmark	\$56,147.14	France	\$41,018.60
Australia	\$55,589.55	Germany	\$40,631.24
Sweden	\$48,874.61	Iceland	\$39,025.70
United States	\$47,283.63	Kuwait	\$36,412.00
Netherlands	\$47,172.14	United Kingdom	\$36,119.85
Canada	\$46,214.91	Italy	\$34,058.72
Ireland	\$45,688.76	New Zealand	\$32,145.23

Source: International Monetary Fund: World Economic Outlook Database, April 2011 [www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org)

## Income Per Capita: Poorest Countries

Haiti	\$672.92	Mozambique	\$458.33
Bangladesh	\$637.91	Guinea	\$448.49
Gambia	\$616.56	Central African Republic	\$435.98
Burkina Faso	\$597.53	Eritrea	\$397.72
Zimbabwe	\$594.33	Madagascar	\$391.82
Timor-Leste	\$588.43	Niger	\$381.16
Rwanda	\$562.31	Ethiopia	\$350.46
Nepal	\$561.87	Sierra Leone	\$325.76
Tanzania	\$548.28	Malawi	\$321.94
Afghanistan	\$517.18	Liberia	\$226.05
Guinea-Bissau	\$508.66	Dem. Republic of Congo	\$186.28
Uganda	\$500.65	Burundi	\$180.07
Togo	\$458.79		

Source: International Monetary Fund: World Economic Outlook Database, April 2011 [www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org)

## Most Expensive Cities

<b>1</b> Luanda, Angola	<b>8</b> Zurich, Switzerland	<b>14</b> Seoul, South Korea
<b>2</b> Tokyo, Japan	<b>8</b> Hong Kong	<b>15</b> Milan, Italy
<b>3</b> Ndjamena, Chad	<b>10</b> Copenhagen, Denmark	<b>16</b> Beijing, China
<b>4</b> Moscow, Russia	<b>11</b> Singapore, Singapore	<b>17</b> London, U.K.
<b>5</b> Geneva, Switzerland	<b>11</b> Oslo, Norway	<b>17</b> Paris, France
<b>6</b> Osaka, Japan	<b>13</b> Victoria, Seychelles	<b>19</b> Tel Aviv, Israel
<b>7</b> Libreville, Gabon		

## Least Expensive Cities

<b>1</b> Karachi, Pakistan	<b>8</b> Calcutta, India	<b>14</b> San Salvador, El Salvador
<b>2</b> Harare, Zimbabwe	<b>9</b> Tegucigalpa, Honduras	<b>15</b> Tirana, Albania
<b>3</b> Islamabad, Pakistan	<b>10</b> Windhoek, Namibia	<b>16</b> Tunis, Tunisia
<b>4</b> La Paz, Bolivia	<b>11</b> Asunción, Paraguay	<b>17</b> Skopje, Macedonia
<b>5</b> Ashkhabad, Turkmenistan	<b>12</b> Gaborone, Botswana	<b>18</b> Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina
<b>6</b> Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	<b>13</b> Tashkent, Uzbekistan	<b>19</b> Chennai, India
<b>7</b> Addis Ababa, Ethiopia		

Source: Mercer