

Retirees in Mexico cut off, study says

They live in enclaves with little contact with home or with the Mexican mainstream

Montreal, Quebec – June 2, 2010 – Baby boomers retiring in Mexico may find it's cheaper to live there than in Canada or the U.S., however, a study suggests retirees are often isolated both from their families back home – and from the mainstream of Mexican life.

The study, by Jesse O'Brien of the University of Calgary, will be presented at the 2010 Congress for the Humanities and Social Sciences taking place at Montreal's Concordia University. O'Brien's study looked at how Canadian and American retirees in a small, unnamed town in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula have adapted to life as expatriates.

"It's an extremely important topic as baby boomers come of retirement age," says O'Brien, adding that many people will want to retire somewhere warm and cheap. He adds that living abroad will become especially attractive if the value of people's pension plans drops. "Moving to a cheaper place like Mexico is going to become a viable option for some people," he says.

But moving to a new country – even if it's an inexpensive tropical paradise – is never easy, and O'Brien says people go through several phases as they adapt to their new life. They start out, he says, by thinking they're going to be living like kings in paradise; eventually, reality sets in.

For most expatriates, reality is that they end up living in a pleasant but isolated enclave.

O'Brien says the expats in the community he studied had essentially recreated a North American lifestyle in one small corner of the Yucatan. "They are living exactly the same life they'd live at home, but in a different location," he says. Most "absolutely love" the life, but his study showed some problems.

The first, he says, is that the expat community is negatively affecting the local population "even though they don't notice it themselves." For example, he said the expats often make no attempt to learn Spanish, and expect to be dealt with in English. And their relationships with the locals are based on service, not friendship. As a result, says O'Brien, the expats' relationship to the locals is often condescending.

He also explains that expats have surprisingly little contact with their families back home. "It's kind of shocking," he says, adding that most people he talked to report that missing family members is the most difficult part of living abroad. Part of that may be due the fact that the community he studied was not on the tourist circuit, and therefore not as easy to get to as some of the cities or resorts.

On the plus side, O'Brien says the fact of living in an enclave and being cut off from family results in the creation of unusually strong community ties. People who wouldn't normally meet back home are thrown together, and because of the circumstances, friendships develop.

O'Brien notes the case, for example, of a burly former biker who became best of friends with an elderly gay man who had moved to Mexico to start a bed and breakfast. The fact of being North Americans together in Mexico often trumps other differences, he says.

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