



Expats in Ensenada: This Sure Beats California!

Patti Morrow, May 2013



Margit Gantt wanted to find a more fulfilling lifestyle than the one she was living in California. Not just one where the weather was great every day, but where her money would go further.

She and her husband Patrick had been vacationing in the seaside community of Ensenada, Mexico for years. "The feeling here is like what California was like half a decade ago," said Margit. "It's different and familiar at the same time. That's what we love about it."

Ensenada is on the Pacific coast of the Mexico's Baja California peninsula. Even though the population is approaching 400,000, it still maintains small-town charm. It has a steadily growing middle class, which is attractive to many Americans who come to visit but stay to live.

In 1989, the Gantt's took the plunge and stayed. They have never regretted it. "It's a thousand times better here," said Margit. "California is so overcrowded now, a bit of a circus, and people aren't a community. The Mexican nationals are both friendly and loyal. People still greet each other on the street even if they don't know each other."

The Gantt's tried out several locations before settling on their current home – a three-bedroom hillside villa with panoramic views of Ensenada Bay, the city, and the mountains.

The couple is able to live a very nice retirement lifestyle with just their social security income. But Margit, an energetic "people person," wanted to do more than just exist. With two partners in tow, she operates Homescapes, a gallery of imported and locally-made art, antiques, jewelry, furniture, textiles and treasures from all around the world, in the middle of downtown Ensenada. "80% of our clientele are Mexican locals," said Margit, "and the rest come from other parts of Baja and tourists."

Margit travels throughout Mexico, Central and South America searching for unique bargains to sell to Ensenada locals and to tourists. "Not only do I bring back beautiful things to sell," she smiled, "but it also serves as a vacation you can make a little money from." The shop also sells merchandise from Egypt, India, and Japan and they plan to open "The Buddha Café on the second floor in 2013.

"One of the things I love about being an expat in Ensenada is that you can be as involved in the community as you want to be," said Margit, who uses her "spare time" for worthwhile causes. She volunteers at the abused women's center, which teaches nutrition, self-esteem, and marketable skills. An accomplished singer, she also directs Hands Across the Border Through Music – a nonprofit exchange program for budding young Mexican musicians, dancers and choirs.

Margit and Patrick love the affordable lifestyle they found in Ensenada. "Today I went to the farmers market in El Sauzal and bought a 2.5 lb. bag of tomatoes, a 2.5 lb. bag of cucumbers and a 3 lb. bag of oranges for 10 pesos or \$0.76 each!" Margit said. "They were organically grown and picked fresh yesterday!" she exclaimed. "What more can one ask for?"

So I did ask. "How are the real estate prices?" I inquired. "Extremely affordable, for all income levels," she replied. A two-story, two-bedroom single family home in a guard-gated, golf course community on the beach with panoramic views – including whale-watching – is currently listed at \$129,000.

When asked what the key to living a happy life abroad is, Margit said, "Find something you love to do. Then do it."