

## Gringos on the lakeshore



Lake Chapala in Central Mexico, with one of the world's most ideal climates, has attracted thousands of transplants from the United States. A mix of indoor-outdoor, country-city living — a laid-back lifestyle in tranquil towns with easy access to an international airport, hospitals and

By Marla Dickerson, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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**CHAPALA, MEXICO** -- Dan and Donna Williams conducted a meticulous search for the dream retirement locale: a place with a laid-back atmosphere yet close to an international airport and good healthcare.

When the Arizona couple finally landed on the shores of Lake Chapala in central Mexico about 40 miles south of Guadalajara, they resisted any temptation to become "margarita buyers": first-time visitors who purchase quickly.



MAP

Instead, the pair spent two years hunting for a house, a three-bedroom home in a community. They and spent the next few years doing a slow remodel, moving full time to Mexico in 2002.

"We didn't want to rush," said Donna, 59, a retired nurse. "You hear about people overpaying for a house."

Few couples are as thorough as the Williamses. But their choice of Lake Chapala underscores a trend: more Americans are moving to the northwest shore of Mexico's largest freshwater lake.

Situated in an elevated valley sheltered by the Sierra Madres, the lake area has one of the most pleasant climates in the world. The temperature is around 75 degrees, with low humidity. The sun shines almost daily, even in winter. The sun seems to come only at night.

"Things rarely get canceled here because of bad weather," said Kent Edwards, a retired teacher in the town of Ajijic. "We're incredibly spoiled."

He and others describe an ideal mix of indoor-outdoor, country-city living -- a laid-back life with easy access to Guadalajara's international airport, hospitals and cultural amenities. Newcomers can plug

The Lake Chapala Society, a 52-year-old expatriate association, provides an array of services including language classes, health screenings and assistance with visas and paperwork. Several English-lan



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Clubs, activities and volunteer organizations abound. Amateur thespians perform at the L English-language playhouse. The area brims with expat artists and writers.

"What keeps me here is the community," said Karen Blue, 63, a former Bay Area resident Reinventing Their Lives in Mexico."

What may prove tougher to balance is the area's shifting demographics. Estimates vary o residents -- anywhere from 3,000 to 10,000. Thousands more come for the winter season

Their presence is noticeable because these foreigners, mostly Americans and Canadians Lakeside that runs from the town of Chapala in the east to Jocotepec in the west. The Me area at just over 81,000.

More expats are on the way. Housing developments aimed at well-heeled retirees are mu with U.S.-style homes priced as high as \$650,000.

That's bringing jobs and investment. It's also stressing the infrastructure, pushing up hous many in the first place. English menus, signs and services are common. Developers pitch speak a lick of Spanish.

"A lot of people . . . want to live in a gated community with gringo neighbors and play golf, Society. "It's going to take a real effort to keep people connected to the Mexican commun

Longtime Ajijic resident Judy King figures a lot of those folks won't stick around long anyw newcomers and said the consumer conveniences that have come with them have made t drive to the U.S. border to get a Thanksgiving turkey.

King runs a seminar for those considering a move. Retirees motivated solely by good weather and cheap prices "are c day when prices go up five pesos," said King, who added that a sense of adventure is key to thriving. So are the three

The Williamses have done just that.

The couple now live in a predominantly Mexican neighborhood in the town of Chapala. They are taking Spanish lesso

They say they're living better than they ever could have imagined on \$1,500 to \$2,000 a month. They eat out frequent their first home, they bought a four-bedroom house with a mother-in-law unit for \$135,000.

But the experience of living in Mexico has been priceless, the couple say. They have been stunned at the warmth and outside the U.S. has given them a new perspective on the world.

Dan, 63, a former fire chief and Culver City native, has no patience for expats who complain about Mexico.

"Happiness isn't a place on the map," he said. "If they aren't happy in the United States, they aren't going to be happy

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