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Guide to Home-Loose Living

**Ellen Barone** July 21, 2014

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Ellen and her husband packed up and "moved" to Latin America (Ellen Barone)

I am two women: a homebody and a traveler.

Part of me adores the cozy conveniences of home: preparing and sharing meals in a familiar kitchen, spending time in the garden, having closets filled with shoes and clothes, established routines, and easy access to family and friends.

Another part of me thrives on the challenges and pleasures of exploration: discovering an unknown place, making new friends, eating unfamiliar foods, learning foreign languages and habits, or simply watching the moon rise over an unexplored horizon.



"Home-loose living" abroad is a lifestyle that can work – if you know how (Photo: Ellen Barone)

Until recently I presumed that reconciling these opposing identities meant balancing time away with time at home. But after three years of home-loose living (having no permanent base), I've discovered that the joy that comes from being at home is internal and portable.

In spring 2011, at a personal and professional crossroads, my husband and I crammed a lifetime of belongings into storage and set off on a multiyear journey with a vague plan of temporarily inhabiting Latin America.



Ellen's multiyear journey took her to Nicaragua (Photo: Ellen Barone)

We've been winging it ever since, with extended stays in Mexico, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Peru: itinerant and loose in the world in a manner that feels rich and meaningful and liberating.

## Do you dream of living abroad? Here are 10 fieldtested tips for successfully navigating a move.

Just do it. I've met people who have been planning a move abroad for decades. They know all about tax laws, health care, climate, cost of living, and visa requirements. They've attended seminars, created spreadsheets, and applied for visas, but in the end they're still sitting at home waiting for the perfect time or place. Others made the move and are frustrated when reality doesn't fit their research. My advice? Go. Stay a few weeks, months, or years. Keep working or retire completely. Sell your house or rent it for income. It doesn't matter. Just do it.



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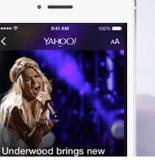
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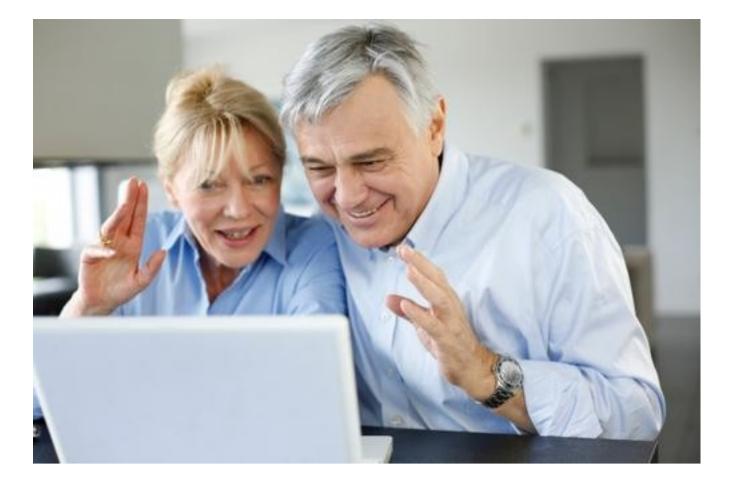
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What your motto should be if you're thinking about moving abroad (Photo: Thinkstock)

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Before you go... Each country has unique visitor requirements. Some places allow you to simply show up and stay. Others require you to obtain a visa ahead of time or leave within a fixed period of time. For entry requirements and visa regulations, I use Smart Traveler, a free app from the U.S. State Department. But for safety concerns, I find the British Foreign Travel Advice more concise and realistic than U.S travel warnings.



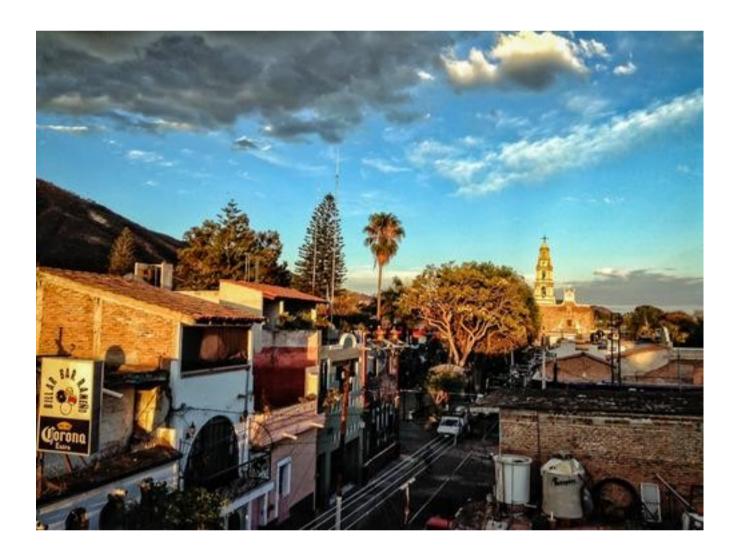
Use apps like Skype, Google Voice or Vonage to save money on international calls (Photo: Thinkstock)

Call home, wisely. I'm frequently asked by American travelers for wallet-friendly advice on using their mobile phones abroad. For brief overseas vacations, activating a temporary global plan offered by your current carrier is probably the easiest solution. For extended stays or living abroad, however, purchasing a SIM card for an unlocked GSM smartphone and using VoIP apps like Skype, Google Voice, and Vonage for international calls, or buying a local phone, is much more cost-effective.



### (Thinkstock)

Money matters. Accessing your money overseas can be as simple as retaining your home bank account and using online bill pay and ATM withdrawals - or as complicated as converting your money to a foreign currency. Nevertheless, it's worth choosing a bank like Citi that has physical branches in other countries and international partner banks where you can withdraw money without foreign transaction fees. It's also wise to use the services of overseas tax specialists like Greenback Expat Tax Services to optimize the tax benefits of living abroad and avoid any adverse consequences.



Ajijic, Mexico was one of Ellen's stops in her "home-looose living" adventure (Photo: Ellen Barone)

Find the right housing. Our search for accommodations usually begins on vacation rental sites like HomeAway, VRBO, and Airbnb. We also surf real estate rental listings and YouTube videos. More often than not, we prebook flights and short-stay accommodations and wait until we're on the ground to make extended-stay decisions. This approach has never let us down and has saved us from making choices that seemed like a good fit online but not so much in person.



Where Ellen stayed in Mexico. Sometimes it's wiser to decide on long-term housing after, rather than before, you arrive (Photo: Ellen Barone)

Adopt a car-free lifestyle. Not only have we saved a bundle on auto insurance, maintenance, and fuel by adopting a carfree lifestyle, but also it's improved our health and enhanced our sense of community. In our daily forages for food and essentials, we've been befriended by merchants and neighbors, taxi drivers and bus conductors. We've lost weight, gained strength, and discovered the joys of hunting and gathering.



*Learn to live without your car — there's a lot you can see on* foot. Like the flower stands in Cuenca, Ecuador (Photo: Ellen Barone)

Plan ahead for snail mail delivery. Some expats, like us, have family or friends back home receive, sort, scan, discard, repackage, and forward their mail. Others opt to deal with mail as the locals do. But a growing trend among expats is to use commercial mail forwarding services, such as US Global Mail and Saint Brendan's Isle, that provide them with a U.S. street address and the ability to control and manage all aspects of their mail from an online dashboard.



Exploring was a big part of home-loose living in Peru (Photo: Ellen Barone)

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Shed the tourist mentality. The impulse to spend your time ticking off items on a tourist to-do list can be strong. But this isn't a vacation, it's your life. What I've found most extraordinary has been the real happiness and fulfillment that comes from the ordinary experiences of everyday life in an unfamiliar place. Our days feel playful and filled with serendipitous explorations as we follow curiosity, discover cafés and restaurants, tune our ears to new languages, walk, write, nap, and make friends.



(Photo: Ellen Barone)

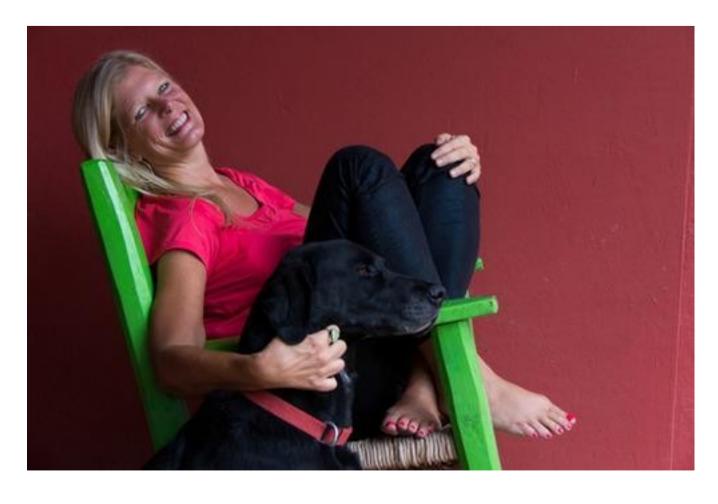
Find courage in a foreign language. I have never been the type of overachiever who enrolled in foreign-language classes before a trip abroad. For me, language wasn't a premeditated destination. I wound up learning Spanish the same way I learned English: I listened, gestured, and spoke nonsense while everyone told me how beautiful my gibberish was. It was nothing like I feared. People were kind and generous and seemed genuinely delighted that I had come to live in their country and learn their language. It's taken me three years to be able to converse in Spanish about things that matter, but despite all the fear and discomfort inherent in learning a new language, the rewards have been intoxicating and unexpected. My world has opened up. I am filled with revelation, pride, and gratitude to life for granting me this opportunity.



You'll be amazed at the friendships you'll create by making a heartfelt effort to speak the local language (Photo: Ellen Barone)

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Make peace with uncertainty. At first, it gave me vertigo to think about our state of impermanence. From childhood, I was taught to value a future that solidified every day into something permanent and secure. But at some point, I realized that I had made peace with a path so full of uncertainty. The truth is that after so many countries and leaps of faith, I've discovered an astonishing sense of my own adaptability and faith in the unknown and have found that there is peace and stability in doing so.



*Ellen Barone* is an American travel writer currently at work on her first book, I Could Live Here, a memoir of home and belonging and meditation on the question she's grappled with throughout her nomadic adventures: How can we feel rooted, deeply and firmly, no matter where we live? You can follow her @ellenbarone.

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