

Back in 2011, the adventures of Dame Maggie Smith, Dame Judi Dench, Bill Nighy and co in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* film charmed the nation. The concept of 60-, 70-, and 80-somethings setting off in the sunset of their lives to a supported-living hotel in India, thousands of miles from friends and family, seemed a touch fanciful.

Fast forward to 2026: fanciful? Not so much. More than one million (1,152,585) Brits are living overseas while drawing their state pension.



Most are in Europe still, but enquiries about retiring to South East Asia are rising. *IFA Magazine* (for financial advisors) reported a 30% rise in searches for retiring abroad, and a survey by *xpatfone.com* had Thailand as the number-one destination, beating the traditional favourite Spain into second place. Malaysia was eighth.

Could it be that Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Malaysia may one day rival Spain, France and Malta as attractive retirement destinations? It's not as

crazy as it sounds, especially given the escalating cost of living in Europe, plus tighter EU residency regulations post-Brexit. Developers in Asian countries are waking up to increased demand, both for retirement residences and care homes.

When UK academic Dr Caleb Johnston went to Thailand in 2024 to investigate care home provision, he found that the number catering for foreigners had doubled since his previous visit in 2018. The UK government now has a list of Thai care homes on its website – around 30.

'It's a trend that could well be growing,' says Dr Johnston, a researcher at Newcastle University. 'Countries like Thailand and the Philippines are starting to look more attractive for retirement as the cost of living and care home prices are much cheaper. Places like Spain just aren't cheap any more. In Thailand, foreigners – particularly relatively wealthy retired people – are welcomed

as people who are going to make important contributions to the economy.'

Anna Jakubiak, 64, started 2026 by retiring and moving to Pai in the mountainous Mae Hong Son Province in northern Thailand. 'It's a spiritual, laidback place,' she says. 'My background is in the criminal justice system and after bringing up six children as a single mother, I just needed to breathe. The people are lovely and there is a culture of kindness – older people are respected. The internet speed in the village is better than London, you can buy antibiotics over the counter for £2, health insurance is £20 a month, dental care in Chiang Mai – three-and-a-half hours away – is state-of-the-art, and someone will do all your laundry for about 50p. I wouldn't have the same quality of life in the UK.'

Anna's son Christopher and his partner run a hostel in the village and are doing up a cottage for her beside a paddy field. 'I miss my other kids, but they are all grown up now – the youngest is 27. We can FaceTime and they can visit.'

Retired artist Denise McMillen, 78, has swapped her flat in London's Crystal Palace for a swish retirement residence in Siem Reap, Cambodia, the country's second-largest city, with a population of just under 250,000.

'I actually saw a small advert in *Saga Magazine*,' says Denise, who is divorced with three grown-up children. 'I'd wanted to move to a warm country and to experience a different culture – the cost of living was a driver too.'

Cambodia has one of the lowest living costs in South East Asia: financial website Numbeos estimates Siem Reap is 56.8% cheaper than London. A meal for one at an inexpensive restaurant is £3.75 and a meal for two at a high-end restaurant is around £17 (without drinks). Add to that a warm climate, friendly people, and a culture where older people are respected and you begin to see the attractions.



Could South East Asian countries like Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia be the new France or Spain for today's retirees? We meet intrepid souls who have made the bold move

I met Denise and some other savvy 60- and 70-somethings in December at the Sullivan Retirement Residence in Siem Reap. The Residence offers rented luxury apartments in a supported community aimed at retirees aged 55 to 80 and opened in 2024. The Exotic Marigold Hotel it ain't, though: there's nothing ramshackle or unfinished here. It has air-conditioning, two meals a day delivered to your door Monday to Friday, an indoor pool and rooftop bar, 24-hour security, communal activities and a driver to take you wherever you want. The cost is around £1,770 a month, including utilities and phone bills, and they also arrange your visa.

Joint owner Tom Sullivan, 35, who lives on site, is confident it's a prototype that could be reproduced elsewhere in Cambodia and in other Asian countries, including Vietnam and Malaysia. 'One of the reasons

I set up the company was thinking about what stopped people moving abroad – one of those things is navigating the bureaucracy,' says Tom. 'Another is the fear of being alone. What's the point of moving to paradise if you just sit by yourself all day and watch TV? What we've provided is a hassle-free way to retire abroad.'

Siem Reap is close to the UNESCO World Heritage site of Angkor Wat, a 12th-century Buddhist pilgrimage site and the largest religious complex in the world. The city itself mixes traditional temples with low-rise French colonial architecture and is extremely walkable, full of bustling markets and pavement cafés.

Denise is enjoying the communal activities at the residence, such as language classes, wine tasting and trips to local tourist spots and high-end hotels such as Cambodia's branch of Raffles. ➔

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by JO WATERS

Eastern promise
Anna (*far left*) retired to Thailand, while Denise (*below left*), pictured at Raffles, lives in the Sullivan Retirement Residence in Cambodia (*left*); Angkor Thom in Siem Reap, a local tourist spot (*above*)