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U.S. GETAWAYS

Snowbirds discover cultural riches of life in the sun belt

Suzanne Wintrob, Postmedia News



Elaine Waddington and Melvin Shipman are typical of today's young-at-heart snowbirds who have no intention of sitting still when trading snow shovels for swimsuits.
J.P. Moczulski for Postmedia News

Melvin Shipman and Elaine Waddington may be retired but that certainly hasn't slowed them down. The couple, in their late 80s, are passionate learners who attend numerous courses, plays and concerts near their downtown Toronto condominium. Learning stimulates the mind while giving them a great deal of pleasure, they say.

But learning doesn't stop at home. For the past four years Shipman and Waddington have wintered on Florida's Gulf Coast, specifically choosing Sarasota for its abundance of

theatre, opera, museums, art festivals and a growing number of venues offering courses designed specifically for retirees. They have studied a wide range of subjects over the years, from Vincent Van Gogh and Leo Tolstoy to the Middle East and chamber music. They frequent the art galleries and the Ringling Museum and venture to neighbouring cities to take in other activities.

“I knew that Sarasota was an educational and cultural gold mine,” says Shipman. “[That was important because] it’s part of our lives, it’s what we do at home.”

Shipman and Waddington are typical of today’s young-at-heart snowbirds who have no intention of sitting still when trading snow shovels for swimsuits. Staying active is the name of the game, with learning, teaching, volunteering, sports and community involvement all on their hectic agendas. In fact, many choose a location to coincide with their passions.

“I hear a lot, ‘We do more when we’re down here than we do at home,’” says Karen Harrell, publisher of Snowbird Gulf Coast Magazine, based in Gulf Breeze, Fla. “At home [snowbirds] get locked back into their old lives with their kids and grandkids and church, whereas here they’re open and free. It’s much like when you go off to college: you’re looking for new friends, the activities are all created for you, everybody is open. When they come here it’s a whole new world. They can look to re-imagine their lives.”

Susan Pearson, a retired school principal and grandmother of 13 from Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., has been wintering in Punta Gorda, Fla., for six years. An avid oil painter since childhood, Pearson takes lessons at Punta Gorda’s visual arts centre while her husband, a retired fire chief, golfs nearby. The condo complex’s clubhouse is also abuzz with shuffleboard, landscaping and other daily programs and volunteer opportunities that draw crowds. Two years into their sojourn Pearson became president of her condo association, a volunteer job that keeps her hopping for five months each year.

“It’s like you’ve reverted to childhood when you’re down there,” says Pearson. “You’re playing games all the time. You’re back riding your bike and you’re out playing bocci. When I sit on my lanai I hear laughter. People are feeling good. They’re getting exercise, they’re getting fresh air. They’re all involved in something. Our (condo) fees are very low because everybody helps out. There’s a sense of community. It’s just really nice.”

Getting involved just becomes the friendly thing to do. Four years ago, Jack and Norma Elliott of Rainy River, Ont., discovered Panama City Beach in northern Florida through friends and now call it their winter retreat (“It’s the Redneck Riviera,” he quips). They met so many people by joining the condo association that they couldn’t help but get

involved. This year Jack is heading up a team of volunteers organizing the area's annual Canada Day celebration, considered the largest single gathering of Canadian snowbirds and their neighbours in the Florida Panhandle and attracting close to 1,000 people. Jack also volunteers on the condo association and teaches computer classes while Norma teaches water aerobics.

Harrell urges would-be snowbirds to venture down south in the off-season to check out different communities and see what they have to offer. Talk to friends and neighbours, she advises, and check out the Internet, magazines and local visitors bureaus for things to do. As for volunteering, she says there are plenty of opportunities at hospitals and in the arts. The Sarasota Opera, for example, holds an annual volunteer fair in January to solicit locals and snowbirds eager to help with everything from sewing and marketing to ushering and functioning as onstage extras.

The plethora of choices can be almost overwhelming at times, some say, but the most active snowbirds wouldn't have it any other way.

"We're very hungry for these sort of things," says Waddington. "We like using our minds."

Finding your dream location in the sun belt

How do potential snowbirds find the right community for them, one that matches their interests and passions? Bob Slack of Ottawa, who winters in the aptly named Winter Haven, Fla. and volunteers as president of the Canadian Snowbird Association, suggests the following:

- Search the Internet: Google terms like "Florida retirement community" or "Florida holidays" and then dig deeper to investigate the area and the complex.
- Try it out: Whether it's Florida, Texas, Arizona or California, venture down, look around and see what appeals to you.
- Rent, don't buy: Rent a property for a month or two in different communities and see if they mesh with your lifestyle.
- Get involved: Check out nearby colleges, universities, cultural centres and even the condo clubhouse for courses, activities and volunteer opportunities. It's also a great way to make new friends.

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