

World's overlooked countries to buy second citizenship, residency

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Hong Kong (CNN) -- Are you jaded with your home country, want to pay lower taxes, enjoy the freedom to travel and strive for a higher quality of life?

Well, if you have as little as \$100,000 then you could buy citizenship to a tiny, tropical Caribbean nation that ticks all of those boxes. Bump an investment up to \$5 million and your quality of life could rocket as you go Down Under; double that and Viennese coffee could start your morning routine -- with prized access through nearly all of Europe.

Aside from obvious countries like the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, who have investor programs and pathways to citizenship, here's a list of countries you might have overlooked. They will welcome you -- if you show them the money.

1. St. Kitts and Nevis

Cash for citizenship is an easy concept to understand. It best applies to just two countries in the world -- both of which happen to be in the Caribbean -- and is 100% legal and can happen in as little as a few months.

The smallest nation in all of the Americas, the island federation of St. Kitts and Nevis, tempts would-be citizens with more than just tropical breezes, swaying palm trees and white sand beaches. It also touts [no personal income tax](#), the allowance for multiple citizenship and visa-free access to nearly 130 countries and territories.

"Overall, St. Kitts and Nevis clearly offers the most attractive citizenship-by-investment program available today," [said Henley and Partners](#), a Zurich-based consultancy specializing in global residence and citizenship planning for the past fifteen years.

Established in 1984, St. Kitts and Nevis' citizenship-by-investment scheme is the longest-running program in the world and offers two avenues to a new passport.

The cheaper option requires a \$250,000 contribution to the country's Sugar Industry Diversification Foundation. Started in 2006, it aims to shift the country [from a sugar-dependent to a service-oriented economy](#).

Real estate investment -- and a higher \$400,000 investment -- is the second route to citizenship. [A government website](#) conveniently lists nearly 60 approved developments -- with alluring names like Sundance Ridge, Calypso Bay and Windswept Residence.

Anyone in the world can apply for citizenship, save one country: Iran. Iranian nationals had been eligible until late 2011 when the [Prime Minister's Office suspended the program](#) after [Iranians stormed the British embassy in Tehran](#).

When contacted by CNN, a St. Kitts and Nevis spokeswoman said the number of applicants accepted under the citizenship-by-investment program "is confidential information that the CIU does not provide to the public."

Henley and Partners noted that "few passports have been issued."

2. Dominica

If you have less money to invest, Dominica is another tropical Caribbean destination to consider.

Not to be confused with the Dominican Republic, this island of just around 73,000 people has offered a [citizenship-by-investment scheme](#) since 1993. Among four package options, a single applicant investment requires just a \$100,000 deposit to the National Bank of Dominica, the [country's largest financial institution](#). The investment amount doubles for a family of four.

Applicants must be of "outstanding character," must wait "at least eight weeks" for approval and must have a "basic level" of English, according to Dominica's website detailing the citizenship path.

An added bonus: investors can stay in their home country for the mandatory interview [provided they foot the bill for three members of the interview panel](#) to fly to them -- the full cost of hotel, airfare, an unspecified per diem and an additional \$3,000.

However, the lower investment hurdle, relative to St. Kitts and Nevis, only gives visa-free access to 85 countries.

More than 2,000 families have gained citizenship through the scheme, according to Henley and Partners.

3. Antigua and Barbuda

While not yet official, this third Caribbean island nation may allow economic citizenship as soon as this summer.

After years of back and forth, the country's parliament finally passed their controversial Citizenship-by-Investment Program (CIP) Bill in March, [according to local reports](#).

Similar to St. Kitts and Nevis, a \$250,000 [contribution to the country's National Development Fund](#) or a \$400,000 real estate investment in approved developments is required. A third option is a \$1.5 million "business investment" that allows an applicant to put money in government-approved businesses.

An additional \$50,000 application fee and a so-called \$7,500 "due diligence fee" exist on top of the investment amount.

If approved, new citizens will enjoy visa-free access to nearly 120 countries, which [include the United Kingdom, France and Canada](#).

4. Austria

In Europe, Austria stands as the lone country where citizenship by investment is possible, according to Henley and Partners.

The route, taken by few and accomplished by even fewer, can happen for "rendering exceptional services in the interest of the Republic," according to [an Austrian government website](#). One such service that has cleared prior clients, added Henley & Partners, is a direct investment of \$10 million -- [a claim reportedly refuted by an Austrian government spokeswoman based in Washington, D.C.](#)

Still, successful applicants for Austrian citizenship can live in a country whose capital, Vienna, ranked as the world's best city for quality of life in a [2012 Mercer survey](#).

But you get what you pay for: Austria, [with its 50% personal income tax rate](#), ranks among one of the highest in the world. A workaround, according to Henley & Partners, is simply to live elsewhere in Europe. Only Austrian citizens who actually reside in the country are subject to taxes.

An Austrian passport easily gives that option by opening many borders. The country is a member of the Schengen Area with its [26 countries spanning most of western Europe](#) sharing common borders without immigration control -- not to mention more than 160 countries in total around the world -- on par with Australia and Canada.

5. Hong Kong

While citizenship-by-investment in Hong Kong is not a possibility, residency-by-investment is. And this Chinese territory's tax rate of just 15% stands as one of this city's biggest draws.

"In all of Asia, in terms of freedom to move capital, taxation and residency requirements, Hong Kong would be the best choice," said Denny Ko, Managing Partner at Henley and Partners in Hong Kong.

Under Hong Kong's [Capital Investment Entrant Scheme](#), or CIES, an investment of about \$1.3 million gives applicants residency rights. You can buy stocks in companies listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, debt securities in airport or railway companies or certificates of deposits that mature after just one year.

In addition to enjoying one of the lowest tax rates in the world, residents can use the city's well-regarded public health care system -- just [\\$13 to see an outpatient specialist](#) versus about \$150 for non-residents.

Permanent residents have also gotten money back from the government. Under Hong Kong's "Scheme \$6,000" whose aim is ["to leave wealth with the people,"](#) more than [6 million people](#) successfully registered to receive roughly US\$770 each. Doing the math, that's potentially \$4.6 billion back to the people since the program began in the summer of 2011. Hong Kong is waiting on word of the program's continuance.

Hong Kong also tempts with a rare nexus of natural and man-made architecture. Lush mountains with [300 kilometers of hiking trails](#) crisscross the Chinese Special Administrative Region (SAR); a Star Ferry ride traversing Asia's largest harbor, Victoria Harbor, presents passengers with one of the world's most iconic skylines. In fact, [Hong Kong boasts the most skyscrapers in the world](#) -- more than 1,300 at current count -- besting [New York's 700](#) and [Tokyo's nearly 400](#), according to global building data provider Emporis.

Nearly [18,000 people](#) have gained residency by investment in Hong Kong. To maintain permanent residency status, just one visit every three years is required.

In 2012, [human resources consultancy ECA International](#) ranked Hong Kong as Asia's third most livable city, with Sydney coming in second.

6. Singapore

However Singapore ranked as [Asia's number one livable city](#) in 2012, according to ECA International.

Similar to Hong Kong, the Lion City's personal income tax rates are among the lowest in Asia -- ranging from 15% to 20% depending on income bracket, [according to auditing firm KPMG](#).

But "for Singapore, it would not be so easy" to become a permanent resident, said Jacqueline Low, COO at immigration services firm Janus. "The criteria are quite high."

Potential applicants must have a three-year track record of business and entrepreneurial experience, Low adds. They must also prove past profitability -- annual revenues of some \$160 million in real estate and construction-related industries or revenues of about \$40 million for all other industries, including pharmaceuticals and manufacturing.

With such foundations, candidates can then apply to Singapore's sole track to permanent residency, the Global Investor Program. This scheme requires [an investment of nearly \\$2 million](#). The funds can go towards starting a new business or expand one already in operation. Money can also be routed to an [approved list of funds](#) that help grow targeted industries ranging from nanotechnology, healthcare and clean energy.

Coupled with low tax rates, applicants who successfully gain permanent resident status can then access [healthcare subsidies ranging from 15% to 75%](#), education subsidies for their children, child-care subsidies and tax deferrals.

Cons for permanent residency include mandatory military service for second-generation males who are also permanent residents, well-known censorship of press freedoms and [seasonal smog blankets from Indonesian forest fires](#).

The Singaporean government does not release information on the numbers of candidates or successful GIP applicants, says Janus' Low. However, since the middle of 2012 she notes "Singapore's immigration policies have been tightened

across the board because of the sentiments on the ground" -- a reference to growing public unease over the number of migrants to the city.

The number of applicants have "fallen by at least half over the past year," she added.

For applicants who are successful, however, permanent residency is a pathway to Singaporean citizenship after just two years. A Singaporean passport gives access to more than 160 countries around the world -- just five less than the United States, according to Henley and Partners.

7. Australia

If you have money to burn and want to go down under for permanent residency and potential citizenship, then Australia's Significant Investor Visa is the way to start.

Launched in November 2012, the program targets high net-worth individuals and requires a roughly [\\$4.7 million investment](#). Applicants can invest in government bonds, infrastructure projects or private companies.

In return -- [and in as little as three months](#) -- a significant investor visa can be issued. After four years, holders can apply for permanent residency.

From the program's launch through May, more than 170 applications have been filed. If all are given the green light, Australia will receive \$850 million in new foreign investment.

Benefits to Australian residency include [free health care](#), some of the world's best beaches and visa-free access to more than 160 countries -- on par with passport holders from the United States and United Kingdom.

And Australian cities have received many high accolades. In 2012, the Economist Intelligence Unit chose Melbourne as the world's most livable city. And in 2011, Conde Nast travelers voted Sydney as the world's best.

But for all the roses, there are also thorns -- and Australians pay for what they get. The country has a [45% personal income tax rate, according to KPMG](#), besting the U.S.' 39.5% rate.

And with Australia's chronically strong dollar, Sydney and Melbourne ranked as two of the world's five most expensive cities to live in 2012, according to the [2013 Worldwide Cost of Living Survey](#) from the Economist Intelligence Unit.