

Another Peasant Valley Sunday



By Trevor and Karen Blake

Foreword

Roll the film back a decade or more, and after yet another dismal English Summer and winter, we chatted with Craig and Jenny over dinner one night about buying a home in Spain. They had lived in the country, and ran a gift shop business there for a little while so they already knew the quirks of the area.

The seed was sown.....

Then, one day, I read a famous book called Rich Dad, Poor Dad, which majored on turning your liabilities into assets. The author showed his readers that for as long as they were sitting on possessions, which were costing money to keep, they were losing money. If you turned those possessions into assets, you started to make money. I could see a lot of sense in that philosophy.

As a result of reading that book, and in a moment of madness, I sold my much-loved Lotus Esprit turbo sports car on this guy's suggestion along with a few other things. Then I began to idly wonder what I could do with the money that I got from it, to turn it into the asset that the author had written about. It was costing me money to sit in the garage, and we only ever took it out on high days and holidays.

Property was not on my perceived list of 'assets'. The UK property market had gone into overdrive, with everyone climbing on to the bandwagon. House prices were spiraling out of control, and it was only a question of time before it began to head into freefall. At the time, we had leasehold on a beautiful old house in Norfolk, which suited us. But the lease was due to run out in 3 years, so we started to explore the possibilities that were open to us.

Then it struck us. Well, it struck me, and I spent the next couple of weeks trying to sow the seed into Karen's mind. Why not investigate the idea of buying in Spain? The coastal areas had all gone through the same boom time, with people clamouring to buy tiny villas plonked one on top of another with paper thin walls and at exorbitant prices – so that idea was out of the window. But we could at least look around to see what was available. Karen began to warm to the idea, after I had worn her down with my enthusiasm, with the guilt trip of getting rid of the Lotus – the second love of my life.

We chatted again with Craig and Jenny, who had bought an old finca (farmhouse) in a rural area, about 30 minutes from the coast, and seemed to be delighted with it, so we asked them to look out for some properties for us to see.

Little did we know that it was going to take us on an exciting new adventure!

Gradually, the idea escalated, until we were searching the Internet for rural properties. My cunning plan was to get Karen to download some pictures of properties, complete with swimming pool, outside barbecue area, and a wine cellar stocked with cheap plonk. We also bought several Spanish speaking courses on cd-rom, after finding out that everyone 10 miles outside of Alicante didn't speak a word of English, and had no intention of learning, and we bought a couple of books about living the dream in Spain.

Later, it transpired that one book was way out of date. That comment was of no disrespect to its author, though. Apparently, the Spanish economy and way of life had accelerated rapidly over the past few years, and the country was also undergoing rapid change due to their entry into the European Community.

One of the Spanish people that we met summed it up quite nicely for us -
"20 years ago, people all rode donkeys. 10 years ago, people had enough money to buy their own donkeys. Now, they buy Mercedes cars and all have mobile phones."

A guy called Chris Stewart (former drummer with Genesis) wrote the other book. He had bought an old property in the mountains of Andalucía, and had spent the next few years trying to live in the most abysmal conditions imaginable. The book was called 'Driving Over Lemons'. By the time I had finished reading the book, I began to wonder why he hadn't given it the more apt title of 'Driving Over Peasants'.

Apparently, he made a fortune from this best selling book and the sequels, but the story had frightened Karen off the idea. He wrote about pouring boiling water on flocks of scorpions climbing up the walls (I have no idea what the collective name for a group of scorpions is, so we'll stick with 'flocks' until I am enlightened on the subject). He also wrote about flash floods that wiped out most of his home. Apparently, huge amorous snakes were waiting to pounce on you from their hideouts in the dried up grass lands, trying to attack your leg like a randy old dog. He also wrote about living without electricity, running water and the other bare essentials of life.

I managed to talk Karen round, and suggested that we should go and take a look for ourselves. It turned out to be the best decision we had ever made. We really hope that it encourages you to live out your dream, instead of living out a life of quiet desperation in the awful English climate, and the unbelievable squalor that has been forced upon our once great country, by people who really shouldn't have been let loose on us all - no matter which Government is in power or what your political leanings are.

As I write this, in our home in England, on 31st July (mid summer) I look outside at the fog and drizzle. It's the middle of the afternoon. Then during a coffee break, I went upstairs to put a jumper on, then went online to check my e-mails. There was one from Craig and Jenny. They took great delight in informing us that it was over 30 degrees in Spain – just 2 hours away!

Read on to find out just why Britain is going backwards, and magnificent countries like Spain are now 10 years ahead of us, both in the standard of living, and in the fabulous way of life that it offers.

We hope you will join us in paradise. All it takes is the nerve to do it, and the ability to make a decision. Go for it, before it really is too late. After all, life isn't a rehearsal. It's the real thing. So you may as well start out on the greatest adventure that you could have! The only decisions that you'll ever regret are the ones you didn't make.....
Enjoy.

Karen and Trevor Blake

The Great Adventure

I remember it so well. The day was the 22nd July 2002. It was Karen's birthday having reached 45 plus postage and packing (she would kill me if I revealed her true age, but I know that Saga has been gearing up to contact her with special offers for new Saga Lout members) I had racked my brains to think of what I could get her, to top last year's birthday presents. She had mentioned seeing an advert for a Michael Ball concert in the Open Air at a nearby stately home, so I secretly got some tickets.

What else could I get her? What do you get for a woman who has everything? I desperately needed to rack up some brownie points.....

Then it struck me, in a moment of madness - a trip to Spain to see Craig and Jenny and to have a look around at some of the properties for sale! It was a fantastic idea, or so I thought. So we arranged for the kids to be taken care of by my in-laws for 3 days, so that I could whisk her off into the sunshine. We had only had 3 or 4 memorable days of sunshine so far in England that year. It wasn't helped by Craig sending us e-mails about the sunshine and how they were sitting out on the patio at midnight drinking copious amounts of cheap wine to the smell of meat sizzling gently on the barbecue.

I e-mailed Craig and Jenny, and eagerly awaited the reply. Yes, of course they would be delighted to see us for a few days. Everyone in Spain just drops in and makes themselves at home, so two more won't make any difference...

As a result, at 3.30pm on Karen's birthday, we found ourselves on a flight on one of those cheap 'get you there somehow' flights with just a piece of hand luggage so that we could get through the airports without having to wait at the other end for our baggage. Karen had also had taken a large gold shoulder bag, which we used for the tickets, mobile phone, passports, purse with credit cards, our cheque books in case we found a property that we liked, and the stuff that all women can't seem to get through the day without, such as the make up, hair brush, tablets, etc.

When we arrived at the little airport in Murcia, I was still puzzling over the fact that we had eaten lunch at home, and by 6 o'clock the same day, here we were in a foreign country, bathed in brilliant sunshine. I needed to get out more...

As we got off the plane to walk across the tarmac, the heat almost bowled us over, and the sun was dancing on the blue waters of the Mediterranean, just a couple of hundred yards away from the runway. In the arrival lounge, Craig and Jenny were waiting to meet us. They both looked better than they had done for years, and wore healthy tans with brilliant white smiles. I instantly envied them. There we were, with all of the baggage of working long 12 hour days, with the extra baggage under our eyes, and our ashen complexions standing out like a pork chop at a bar mitzvah.

Before we headed for their home, they offered to take us out to one or two of the bars that surrounded the marina at Alicante, and show us the sights. There, in the peaceful harbour, were hundreds of boats of all shapes and sizes. It was like a millionaire's playground, with the sun glistening on the hulls of the huge motor boats and yachts. I made a quiet decision on the spot. One of the first items on our shopping list was our own boat – just as soon as we had won the National Lottery, of course.

We sat in one of the bars, as the late evening sun began to set. As the warm, gentle breeze drifted across the marina, we had a couple of beers, whilst catching up on all the news and gossip. I was amazed at Jenny's grasp of the Spanish language whenever she spoke to the waiters, and even more amazed at Craig's apparent grasp of it in such a short time. I was also gobsmacked at the amount of young children sitting at the tables at 10 o'clock at night with their parents, eating dinner. It was a real family atmosphere.

I quizzed our hosts about this.

Craig replied "It's the Spanish way of life. It's very family orientated, and you will see children out until 1 or 2 in the morning, enjoying the time with their parents."

That was kind of nice. We are real family people, and back home, it isn't the done thing to take your children everywhere. You would have to hang your kids up on the coat hooks in the cellar or arrange for babysitters – often complete strangers – to look after them. Here, in this strange country, their family is their total life, and their way of life.

A little while later, we all agreed to go to a nearby restaurant, to try the local food. Spanish food - not the stuff you get at the holiday resorts. This was the real thing.

I was quite hesitant, as I am not adventurous when it comes to food, but Karen's eyes lit up when olives, prawns, salads, weird looking fish and plenty of local wine appeared on the scene. And it appeared in bucketfuls. No sooner had we eaten one dish, than another one appeared.

I have to admit that even I enjoyed the meal. There we were, at 11 o'clock at night, in T-shirts and shorts sitting outside in the fresh air, eating healthy food. The charm of Spain was beginning to get to us.

Then, all of a sudden, our whole world turned upside down.....

We hardly noticed the four people sitting at a table next to us. Jenny got up to go to the loo, and we offered to pay for the meal. The four of us had drunk beers, a couple of bottles of really nice wine, and had eaten to our hearts content, and the bill came to 89.60 Euros (around £55) A similar meal in Britain would easily have cost double that amount. I guess that's what everyone does when they first go over to Spain – they compare everything against English prices, and are usually visibly shocked.

Anyway – back to the plot. Karen gave me the Euros from her purse to pay for the meal, and put her purse back into the bag by her feet. That was the last we ever saw of it.

As we got up to leave, Karen reached for her bag. It wasn't there. Neither were the four people on the next table.

To this day we don't understand how it happened, or how they managed it. Craig was sitting right next to Karen, with her bag in between, and the handles on the armrest of her chair. I was sitting directly across from her, just a couple of feet away. Yet this gang of what can only be described as professionals had somehow managed to take the bag, and make off without anyone seeing.

We looked under the table, we looked at each other in disbelief, and Karen looked shocked. We asked the waiter if he had seen it, with no success. Then he told us that the four people had sat down, but hadn't ordered any drinks or food, and had for some reason left the restaurant without anyone noticing a thing.

The restaurant owner called the Port Authority, who quickly turned up, then disappeared off to see if they could find anything. We never saw them again, either.

Now I don't know about you, but we are the type of people that stay calm in a crisis. However, having just landed in a strange country on a four-day whistle stop tour, panic began to set in. Every single possession that we owned was in Karen's shoulder bag. Credit cards. Lots of them. Cheque books, with pots of money in the account that we had transferred over in case we wanted to put a deposit on a property. Our mobile phone, for contacting our family back in England. Karen's reading glasses and sunglasses. Our camera. Flight tickets. Passports. You name it, and it was in that bag.

How would we get home? If we could get back to England, how were we going to drive our car without car keys? If we could drive our car, how would we get it out of the Airport car park, as the automatic barrier ticket was in the bag? What about the money? If we could get the car out of the car park back in England, how could we pay, as we had lost our credit cards, along with all the sterling and Euros that were stuffed in Karen's purse for safe keeping?

Then there was the missing makeup. Karen is the type of woman who feels that if she hasn't got make up on, she is not dressed properly. If I recall correctly, I think that was one of the first things she uttered when she realised that the bag had gone. "What about my makeup?" she cried. "What am I going to do now?"

If you have ever had something stolen, your car broken into, or lost a bag or a case, you begin to realise just how much it is going to affect your whole life from that point on. Credit cards, membership cards, odds and sods that you always keep in your possession - all gone. And it's even worse when you are in a strange country, where you cannot understand a word that anyone says...

We collected our thoughts, and then Craig and Jenny hit their mobile phones, calling the police, our home, the credit card people, and anyone else that we could think of. If these professionals were that fast, and that experienced, they could run up a couple of thousand pounds in 5 minutes flat. So we implemented whatever emergency procedures we could, whilst I flew around the streets and the backs of the restaurants, looking in all the litterbins for any sign of our belongings. As a former policeman I knew it would be in vain, as the bag was probably at the bottom of the marina, minus the valuables. But I just had to do something, as Karen was quite distraught. I wasn't too happy about it myself, and if somebody was walking along with our gold handbag in their possession, they wouldn't have seen the sun come up the next day. At that precise moment, I was licensed to kill.

Eventually, we calmed down and got directions to the police station in Alicante, arriving there just before midnight. We sat in the small waiting room, with half a dozen other people, waiting our turn. As we sat there, with all the thoughts buzzing around our heads, my mind flashed back to those films that you see, where people get thrown into foreign jails, with the flies landing lazily on their victim, drenched in sweat from the warm night. You know the ones – the greasy haired stubble faced gringo lazily swats the fly that lands on his cheek or splats a cockroach wandering about on the wooden table in the heat...

My thoughts were rudely interrupted by a 'next please' buzzer, and it was our turn to go into the main office, where half a dozen policemen were sitting in a row at enquiry desks. The girls sat down, and I stood behind them. Thank heaven for Jenny's command of the Spanish language. She took over, and began to explain the evenings' events to the policeman.

The guy we were landed with obviously reckoned he was something of a Romeo with pretty women. He muttered something in Spanish, threw back his head and laughed, then leant back on his chair with a silly grin and ushered me back out of the room with a dismissive wave of his hand. So I sheepishly left, and went back into the waiting room to join Craig, who had struck up a conversation with a local couple that had just come into the police station. They had been at a restaurant two doors along from us on the marina, and she had her handbag stolen too. So there was obviously a very professional gang working the area.

A couple of hours later, the girls finally rescued themselves from Romeo's grasp. All during the interview, he had likened Karen to Catherine Zeta Jones, and he told them to get rid of the 'amigos' in the waiting room, so that he could take them out dancing until the wee small hours... the dirty little devil.

Exhausted after being on our feet for 24 hours, we finally got back to Craig and Jenny's at 4 in the morning, clutching the police report. No sooner had we walked through the garden gate than we were confronted by Morgan, their 11 stone Rottweiler, who appeared to remember me from our first encounter in Chelmsford a couple of years before. We had gone over to Craig and Jenny's for a party, and Morgan was leashed to a drainpipe on the bungalow in the grounds of the main house. Morgan had taken one look at me, then lunged for all his might at a certain part

of my anatomy. I swear to this day that the whole bungalow moved at least 2 feet in my direction!

So having said our hello's to him once again, but this time at a respectable distance (whilst protecting the family jewels) we were invited to take a look around their 'rustic' finca. As we walked across the dusty ground, all of a sudden a wriggling bundle of fur leapt out from the bushes at us, trying to jump up and lick our faces, biting our ankles, and rolling over in the dust in front of us every time we attempted to move.

Apparently, Craig and Jenny had inherited a stray Alsatian cross puppy, who had found her way into their garden. God knows why Morgan hadn't eaten it for lunch, but the puppy kept jumping all over us, Morgan, and Craig and Jenny. All hell was let loose. Our hosts finally managed to tie it up to a nearby tree, and we escaped to the house. I'm sure that the tree Morgan was tied to tree moved across the courtyard as the monster tried to follow us....that dog was HUGE.

We began to look around the house. In my mind, 'house' wasn't the word. 'Building site' came to mind though. It was a huge property, and a huge project to undertake. Whilst we could see the potential, I don't think I could have even begun to tackle something like that.

Spanish properties differ somewhat to English houses, and it's a bit of a culture shock to anyone who drinks Earl Grey tea, or is used to picnics on the lawn with cucumber sandwiches.

The occupants used to live downstairs, and keep all their animals upstairs. Apparently, it was something to do with the time of the Spanish Civil war and the reign of Franco. He loved to get his soldiers to pillage and plunder the houses, and take whatever possessions the peasants had. So they would secrete their animals upstairs. I also figured out why everyone has bars on their windows. The Spanish have something called a 'black economy' which still goes on today. All transactions were made in cash, which meant that they had mattresses stuffed full of millions of pesetas, and didn't want anyone else to get their hands on it.

So when you think of a bedroom, think of a stable with concrete feed troughs, and holes in the floors that were used to pull feed and water up through. When you think of windows, think of metal bars and wooden shutters, to stop people from breaking in to steal the animals or the pesetas, and to prevent the sunlight bleaching the furniture, or turning the place into a furnace in the heat of the day. When you think of roofs, don't think of straight, neatly tiled roofs. Think of rickety roofs with huge tiles on, and boulders on the edges of the tiles to prevent them from being ripped off during an El Nino. (A natural storm phenomenon in Spain). And don't think about pretty paved patios, surrounded by neatly mowed lawns. Think instead, of a dust bowl, surrounded with brownery instead of greenery. That will give you a good starting point.

On the tour of their building site, we were taken into a room under the stairs, which was another former cattle stall. "This will be our bathroom" Jenny said proudly. I tried to imagine it looking something like a bathroom, but it just didn't work for me. The dead rat in the corner was giving off a pungent smell, and the hay was still in the cattle feeders.

Then, we were taken into 'what was going to be the kitchen'.

"Don't worry about the holes in the thatched roof," Craig said, "the builder is going to repair that" Personally, I thought that it was rather romantic, with the stars twinkling through the holes, and glinting off the chrome handle of the freezer....

The makeshift bathroom was even more exciting. A little gecko (lizard) popped out to greet us from one of the holes in the crumbling walls, and Jenny took great pains to explain how the temporary plumbing worked, in order to possibly get a hot shower. It later transpired that when you took a shower, the tiny shower tray wasn't quite big enough for anything larger than a midget to stand in, and the curtains immediately sucked up to your body like a giant limpet. You had to fight your way out of it again, whilst attempting to wash your hair with a bottle of shampoo in one hand, as there was nowhere to put it, with your outstretched leg holding the door closed. Not a pretty sight...

I don't remember much of the upstairs, apart from going from cattle stall to cattle stall in the pitch black, stumbling over the uneven semi-concrete floors, and seeing more stars twinkling through the 'roof'.

Going back downstairs, we went into the makeshift kitchen, which I couldn't even begin to describe. But at least they had their priorities right, with a freezer and a huge fridge stuffed full of beer and wine.

We finally climbed into bed at about 4.30am, too exhausted to even speak to each other, with our heads still spinning with the thoughts of being stranded in a strange country where we couldn't even speak the language, and having lost our whole world in that bag, in just a few brief seconds.....

About 3 hours later, we were woken up to the sound of Morgan barking and throwing himself at the window trying to eat the shutters to get in at us. There was another strange phenomenon too. Strong bright sunlight was streaming through the cracks in the shutters on the window! This I had to see, so I spent 5 minutes wrestling with the cling film curtain in the shower, and dared to slip on some shorts, T-shirt and a pair of flip flops left over from a recent holiday in Majorca. As I pulled open the front door to go out into the garden, there it was. Brilliant sunshine, blue skies, a backdrop of mountains, and a warm breeze greeted me. It was absolutely glorious. No words that I could think of could really describe it

Craig had already got up and had tied both the dogs up to trees. There was just enough of a gap to get between them and on to the patio area, if you shuffled your bum in the right way. Morgan was on one side, drooling at the mouth in anticipation of taking a chunk out of my posterior, and the puppy was on the other side, intent on whipping me to death with her tail. I skillfully maneuvered myself between the two, and we sat in the patio area in the morning sunshine drinking coffee, whilst waiting for the girls to get out of their pits. The temperature at 8 in the morning was 25 degrees, and the crickets were already starting their chorus. The olive groves at the end of the garden were beginning to shimmer in the heat, against a backdrop of mist covered mountains, leading down to the rest of the lazy whitewashed village.

As we mused over the events of the night before, it was easy to see why Craig and Jenny had fallen in love with their place. Peace and solitude, away from the tourist element of the mainland coast. Fantastic weather – far less humid than the coast, and fabulous scenery. The outside of the finca belied the inside. It actually looked quite habitable, and I wondered if our tour of the property the night before was just a bad dream.

Because of the handbag affair, the plans for the day had been completely thrown out of the window. Jenny had made us some appointments in advance with the local estate agent, but these had to be hastily re-arranged. The first priority was to go to the British Consulate in Alicante to try and get emergency passports, and make sure that our bank accounts were safe. We had tried to cancel our mobile the previous evening, but couldn't get through. When we did

manage to get through, whoever had stolen the bag had run up almost £800 in calls... These people clearly knew what they were doing.

The excursion to Alicante took most of the morning, and everything had to be done within a short time. Even the British Consulate took their afternoon siesta at 2 o'clock. But they were fantastic, and did it with 3 minutes to spare. Then, after a spot of lunch at a pavement café, we trekked back to Pinoso to meet the estate agent for 5 o'clock. The estate agent was called Pepe. Later on, we meet another Pepe, so we'll call this one Pepe 2, in order to avoid confusion. In Spain it seems that everyone is either called Pepe, Pablo, Paulo or Paco.

Luckily, Pepe 2 had recently hired an American lady (also called Karen) who spoke fluent Spanish, as Pepe 2 couldn't speak a word of English. So to avoid even more confusion, we'll call her Karen 2.

Stay with the plot – its' all quite simple to understand really!

Actually Karen 2 hid a big secret which we only discovered later when we saw a photo. If you were around in the 70's, you will remember the group Manfred Mann. It turns out that she was once married to Mike D'Abo the lead singer! That was many years ago though.

Karen 2 started flicking through the properties in her books, ranging from casas (houses) to fincas (farmhouses) to cortijas (goodness knows what they were) to shacks in the middle of fields.

I knew what we could and could not afford, as we had already decided before we went out to Spain.

"Anything up to £100,000" I said hopefully.

"No problem" Karen replied in her wonderful mixed up American/English/Mexican/Spanish accent "that narrows it down quite a bit". It actually narrowed it down to about one quarter of her portfolio.

There were about half a dozen properties in total within our price range, so we chose a few that did not look like total bomb sites. That evening, we went to see 2 properties, and had 2 more lined up for the next day. We all climbed into Pepe's old Nissan 4 x 4 and headed out along the dusty roads until we came to the first property.

Our hearts dropped. We stopped at a total ruin of a property. "This is it" Karen 2 said cheerfully. "What – this ruin?" I replied, dismayed. "No – the place we are going to see is behind it" she replied.

We walked around the back, to a wall with a white gate, and were greeted by a couple of yapping rug rats called Honey and Bonny. They have weird looking dogs in Spain! Then, to our amazement, the house owners – a delightful English couple, Heather and Arthur, met us. After exchanging greetings, I asked the most basic question that you should ask, "Why are you selling up?"

It turns out that they had moved out to Spain 15 years ago. Heather was now of advancing years, and was unable to drive. They lived quite far from a main village or town, and Heather felt very isolated. So they were looking to move nearer to town.

I asked them if they liked living in Spain, and they didn't reply. They just looked at me as if I was on another planet. Who wouldn't like to live in constant sunshine and warmth?

We took a tour of the house. Arthur had spent all of his time doing it up as a labour of love, and he had made a nice job of it. It wasn't to our taste. It wouldn't have been out of place in a row of terraced council houses in Dagenham, where someone buys their property and then proceeds to let everyone know about it. You must have seen them - double glazing with leaded lights, a wagon wheel stuck on the wall, big plastic butterflies on the roof, stone cladding on the walls, and huge wrought iron gates on the driveway – that sort of feel.

Arthur's place wasn't totally like that, but as we were given the guided tour, we felt that all that was missing were the garden gnomes...

We bade our farewells and wished them luck with selling their property. Then it was on to the next one. In the 4 x 4, the conversation was a little stilted.

"What do you think?" Karen 2 asked inquisitively.

"Well," Karen replied tactfully. "They had done it very nicely, but it wasn't quite what we were looking for"

Karen relayed this to Pepe2 in Spanish, and Pepe2 rolled his eyes. I think he was hoping that we would just buy it, so that he could go back to doing more important things.

As we neared the place, there was something familiar about the area. "Haven't we been here before? Karen asked. "Dunno," I replied. It seems spookily familiar"

Karen 2 explained that the property we were going to view was an old town house in a quiet village. The house apparently hadn't been lived in, but was in quite good condition.

We stopped outside, met the owner who lived in another house nearby, and walked around the corner to the front of the property.

No wonder the area was familiar. There, across the road about 100 yards away was Craig and Jenny's house...

So it was a good start. If we bought the place, we would at least have English speaking neighbours to help out. But that was the **only** good thing about the place – everything went downhill from there.

Have you seen the film A Fistful of Dollars? The inside of the property was reminiscent of that film and that era. Marble floors, a single wrought iron bed in a huge room with beamed ceilings and a large crucifix on the bare walls. There was no actual natural light in the place, and we noticed that even in the heat of the day, the property was remarkably cool, due to the extremely thick stone walls. All that was missing was some tumbleweed being blown down the main street, and a guy with a poncho and sombrero snoozing against a wall, shaded from the heat of the sun.

The upstairs of the property was in a worse state than Craig and Jenny's place. Again, the typical cattle stalls adorned every room, and no stretch of the imagination would allow us to see how we could convert these cattle rooms into living accommodation.

Virtually all of the fincas in this wine-growing region have what is called a bodega. This is the place that the owners used to bring in the grapes, throw them into a big pit, and dance all over them to make wine. Most of these bodegas are no longer used, but they are enormous rooms that can, with some imagination, be turned into living accommodation.

This property was no exception. The bodega had a corrugated iron/thatch roof, which was mostly open to the elements. I never actually saw a kitchen in the whole place, but the owners had installed a bathroom in the bodega. Well, a sort of bathroom. It was more like a sort of

indoor shed, sort of built in the bodega. There was a sort of bath in there, with a sort of toilet. The sort of toilet pan was against one wall, and the sort of cistern was on the opposite wall. I think it sort of worked though.

We both looked at each other in despair. From Karen's face, I saw that she wasn't too impressed with the place...

I spoke to Karen 2 "I think this is what would be called a 'major project, and it's not the sort of project we had in mind"

More conversation between Karen 2, Pepe 2 and the owner ensued, then we bade our farewells, and went back to the estate agents office where Craig and Jenny were waiting to pick us up and take us back to their house.

"How did you get on?" Jenny asked, but no sooner had she done so she saw the look on both of our faces. "I take it that they were not the sort of places you imagined, then"

"I don't know how to put this," I replied, "but we didn't envisage taking on a project like you've taken on. Ten years ago, it might have been a different story, but we kind of like a few home comforts these days."

Karen piped in cheerfully "We've got another couple of properties to see tomorrow, so perhaps something will turn up then" I could tell by her voice that she wasn't that optimistic about it!

"Do you guys fancy going out for something to eat?" Craig asked. "After all, it's about time you sampled the real Spain"

By that time, we could have eaten a scabby cat as we were so hungry, so we set off in the evening sunshine to Monovar, a nearby town, to meet Pepe number 1.

Now this was the real Spain – not the nicked handbags, the tourist areas with the 'English Feesh and Cheeps – Eat Here' café's or 'pop in for a real Irish welcome at Paddy's Irish Bar' places.

We walked down a side street and ended up in a precinct where there were tables and chairs outside a tapas bar. Pepe 1, a 70-year-old man with Mr Spock ears and the most wonderful smile greeted us. We were then introduced to Craig and Jenny's builder who was 90 if he was a day, and lots of other friendly people who were seated around the various tables. They all greeted us warmly. We also met the waiter, a devilishly handsome Spanish guy with an unpronounceable name, and a super personality to go with it – genuine, friendly, and warm. In fact, virtually every Spanish person that we met had the same trait.

We sat down to sample the tapas – plates of food that just kept coming, along with copious amounts of excellent wine. Craig and Jenny spoke to everyone in their native tongue, chatting like natives. Karen and I felt totally inadequate, and at that same precise moment, we both made a mental note to learn the language as soon as we returned home.

As I said, I am not very adventurous when it comes to food. I have been brought up in a culture of meat and two veg and a fry up in the mornings. So it was quite a shock to see all of those weird things on the different plates. There were prawns, which seemed almost as big as lobsters, cuttlefish, swordfish, and small snails in cumin sauce – yes, snails – and other things like tuna steaks, anchovies, pasta, salad, and huge olives with baby gherkins stuck in them. You name it; we ate it, and I managed by washing it all down with several bottles of wine. There

were even some creatures of doubtful origin on a plate, but you know the old saying. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. So I tried it all. The only things I didn't like were the snails.

Then Pepe brought over a bottle of Napoleon brandy and a bottle of Chivas Regal. After pouring out a large glass for each of us, he left the bottles on the table to help ourselves. We also had some more food to eat, but my recollection of the rest of that delightful evening started to get a little hazy from that point on...

All I do recall that this street banquet was one of the nicest meals that I had eaten. Pepe and his staff treated us like old family friends even though they had never clapped eyes on us before. The mistake that most foreigners make when going to a country like Spain is that they tend to stick with the food they know and to stay in groups of their own kind. That's why the 'feesh and cheep' places are always crowded. Why go all the way to another country just to get the same thing that you could have got at home? As soon as you step outside of your comfort zone you begin to see a country for what it really is. And it really is fantastic.

Sometime during that heady evening, I recall Craig telling me that Pepe had invited us back the next day, where he would lay on a really nice spread for us, with whisky and coffees thrown in.

We headed back to Craig and Jenny's in the early hours, and I vaguely recollect that we ended up sitting around the patio on a warm, balmy night, drinking another glass or two, or perhaps three, of the delicious wine. Or was I simply getting drunk on the experience of this totally different way of life?

The next day, we were up early again, as we were to go with Pepe² and Karen² to see the last couple of fincas. The toll of the past couple of nights had caught up with me, and I was running late. I groped my way to the bathroom to wake myself up with a shower, and still half asleep, I made a feeble attempt to wash my hair, whilst trying to get the water temperature right. It kept alternating between scalding and freezing. The shower curtains did their usual thing, clinging to every part of my body that was wet, wrapping further and further around me.

That wasn't so bad, but all of a sudden the puppy gremlin furball hit me from every angle. Somehow, it had wormed it's way into the house, and headed straight for the bathroom. The door flew open, and furball joined me in the shower. There was water everywhere, the shower curtains wrapped around both of us, and furball was on turbo lick. She then laid on her back with her legs in the air in the soapy puddle of the shower tray, smacking her tail on the water like she was trying out the crescendo of the 1812 overture on a bass drum.

In my effort to get out of the shower, I tripped over the pup, and landed in a naked ungainly heap on the floor, with the soggy furball jumping all over me, and licking the soap off my face. Some days, it's not worth chewing through the leather straps.....

A short time later, Craig and Jenny dropped us off at the estate agents, after a cup of coffee in a local tapas bar.

Karen 2 and Pepe 2 were there, ready and waiting. We climbed into the 4 x 4.

"We're going quite near to where I live" Karen 2 explained. "My husband and I are artists, and we fell in love with the village when we saw it. Our place needs doing up, but we see it as a long term project"

That didn't leave anything to the imagination – obviously they lived on a building site too. She explained that their first priority was to get their studio up and running so that she could do her

sculpting and hubby could do his painting. It was only recently that they had got hot water installed and electricity to most of their rooms.

It seems to be the way that everyone did it around these parts, so we were getting resigned to the fact that we too would be living in a Travis Perkins yard instead of a proper house... Karen 2 interrupted my thoughts.

“The house we’re now going to see is half renovated” she continued. Part of it is livable, and part of it needs doing up – but it has tremendous possibilities”.

As we made our way up the mountain road, I couldn’t help but admire the spectacular scenery. Neither could I understand why these roads were so good, compared to the roads in Britain. We were travelling on a road that serviced a few tiny villages, cutting a swathe through the foothills of the mountains in the middle of nowhere, yet it was totally perfect, and astonishingly well maintained. It made our British main roads look pathetic.

Eventually, we entered a district called Tore Del Rico, which, translated, means ‘Tower of the Rich’. We had a feeling we might like this place as it had a nice ring to it. Stopping outside a stone building we all piled out of the car whilst a lady called Raquel who was waiting at the property began to unlock the heavy doors and wooden shutters.



We expected the worst. However, as we entered the hall, we were pleasantly surprised. Whilst the walls were bare plaster, it had typical beamed ceilings, with the curved plaster in between each one and a floor made from old flagstones.

We went up the stairs and visited the bedrooms, which were, wait for it –NOT cattle stalls. They were actually bedrooms with beds. Unbelievable!

Karen and I whispered to each other “this is an improvement on what we’ve seen so far – wonder what the un-renovated bit is like?” “Can’t wait to see it, myself”

Karen 2 overheard us. “Actually, this is the bit that *hasn’t* been renovated” she said, smiling. “Raquel has kept it very nice. Come and have a look at the other part of the house”

We couldn’t wait. We went back downstairs, passed through a couple of rooms that again needed a bit of titivating (okay, it needed a couple of walls knocked down, and a few other major alterations, but it was 1000% better than anything that we had seen so far.) Then, we went into the living area which, whilst being quite basic, was actually perfectly inhabitable. It had a proper

tiled bathroom with sink, loo, proper shower- and the kitchen even had a washing machine!
This property owner knew how to live in the 21st century.

Trust me – this was the best kitchen that we had seen in all the houses....



Then we went out into the courtyard, a totally walled off area, which had a bit of rubble scattered around but could be done up quite nicely. The sun was shining over the whole yard, with a nice patch of shade as you came out of the door. Perfect for sitting out in to read a book or have a siesta.

You just had to use your imagination!





We then went around to the land at the side of the property. It was about 3000 square metres of scrubland but it was a perfect place for a swimming pool.

Things were definitely looking up. Looking back though, I think we had got too much sun!

The last bit we were shown was the bodega. Raquel threw open the doors, and through Karen 2 she apologised for the piles of junk stored in there. There was some old furniture that would have fetched thousands of pounds back home, plus huge casks and wine presses still in situ. The place was so big you could have built a retirement bungalow in there and still have room to spare. I just loved the old round glass wine containers slung in one corner and thought how nice they would look in a corner of the hall.



Karen spoke to Karen 2. "Yes, I quite like it" she said hesitantly "but I'd like to go and look at the next property"

We thanked Raquel and headed off back to the hills. Eventually, we went up a dirt track and ended up outside another finca in the middle of nowhere. The views were absolutely breathtaking and you could have heard a pin drop.

Pepe unlocked the front door, and we all trooped inside. It was like something out of a horror film where the place had been abandoned and nobody knows to this day what happened to the occupants.

There were some gaudy Christmas decorations still hanging up in the hall. A glass cupboard still held crockery, and in the first bedroom a wedding veil was hanging up on a hook in the wall. That would make a brilliant opener for the film, wouldn't it? As we made our way through the darkened house in the eerie silence, I could have sworn that several pairs of eyes were following our every move. Suddenly a hand grabbed my shoulder and I stifled a scream. It was Karen trying to follow me, through the rubble and debris of the usual upstairs cattle rooms, in the darkness. Then a pigeon flew up in front of me and out of a hole in the roof causing my heart to jump into my mouth. Already, I had seen enough.

To cut a long story short we won't bother to describe the rest of the house to you. Suffice to say that it put the other building sites to shame. No matter how we looked at it, and no matter how beautiful the scenery was, we just couldn't face a project of that scale. I just couldn't see Karen tripping to the well every day to get water to wash with, or cooking on an open fire. It was straight out of Chris Stewart's Driving Over Lemons book.

The place was relatively cheap – about £70,000. But you would have needed to spend that much again just to get it habitable.

We both shook our heads at Pepe, who seemed to have totally lost interest in us by this time. You could almost hear him thinking "what do these stupid English people expect. This is how people live out here. If they wanted nice curtains and running water, they should buy a villa on the coast!"

We stood outside by the well, soaking up the sun, and taking one last look at the scenery.

"Well, that's it," Karen2 said. "We've shown you all the properties in your price range. Wasn't there anything you liked?"

"I quite liked the one before this one. What do you think, honey?"

Karen looked thoughtful. "There was something about the last one that appealed to me, but I'd like to have another look at it before I make up my mind"

Karen 2 had a conversation with Pepe, who rolled his eyes to heaven again.

"How much was that other place?" I asked.

"69,000 Euros" Karen2 replied. "It only went on the market yesterday, and it is quite a bargain at that price"

Surely there must be a mistake on the price, I thought to myself. It worked out to just over £50,000 at the time – about half the price of the des res building sites that we had looked at!

“Yes – for that price, we’re DEFINITELY interested” I said. “But we’re only here until Thursday so we’d like to go back and have another look at it. We can give you a yes or a no on the spot”

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s make it tomorrow afternoon”

On the way back, I made a mental note of where we were, because I wanted to go out and have a sneaky look around the area.

When we got back to Pinoso, Craig and Jenny were nowhere to be seen so Karen and I sat in the sunshine in the town square discussing the 2 properties that we had seen.

“I don’t know” said Karen. “I’ll need to go and see it again. It was quite nice”

“Nice? Nice?? For that price, we can afford to do it up, and make it gorgeous!” I replied, through my rose coloured spectacles. “You said you wanted one with a courtyard, and it’s somewhere that we could actually live in whilst we’re doing it up, and...”

“Yes,” she replied” but let’s go and see it again first.”

Finally, our hosts turned up. “How did you get on?” Craig asked. “I think we’ve found something” I replied. “We’re going back tomorrow to take another look at it”

“There, what did I tell you?” Jenny said to Craig, excitedly. “I had a funny feeling that they would find something today!”

We couldn’t wait for the next day so that we could go out and see it again. We hopped into Jenny’s open topped sports car, and sped off to try and find the place again. When I had asked Jenny why she left the roof down, even overnight, she had laughed at me. “Why put it up? It hasn’t rained here for 4 months...”

Eventually, we found Torre Del Rico again, after getting lost a few times. As we wound our way up the hill, it was even more beautiful than we remembered. We stopped outside the house and took some pictures to show the kids when we got back. I kept quizzing the guys, looking for a confirmation that we were going to make the right decision. “Do you think it’s worth the money? Is it a good place to live?” They could see that I was excited. “It certainly looks okay from the outside” Jenny replied. “And it’s in a beautiful location.”

Beautiful was an understatement. The village itself was tiny, with a dozen houses and a drop dead gorgeous Old Spanish church with twin towers, and a huge bell. To the side of the church, there was a gravel seating and meeting area, that overlooked the most incredible mountain and valley scenery that I have seen in my life, with hardly a sound to break the calming silence. All the while that we were there, we only saw one very old car in the village. The streets were almost totally deserted – and it wasn’t even siesta time.



We then toured around the area and discovered that it was literally 6 minutes away from the town of Pinoso where the estate agents office was. Things were getting better all the time...

We had some lunch in another friendly Tapas bar, and then Craig left in his car to go to the airport to pick up his brother and 14-year-old niece. They were coming to stay for a week, whilst his brother had a look around to see if there was a business that he could buy on the coast.

We then went back to view the house again at the appointed time to meet up once again with Pepe2, Karen2 and Raquel, who was joined by their daughter.

Jenny started to busy herself taking photos of the inside of the property, for us to take back home.

The house was even more interesting than we first remembered, and both Karen and myself saw the potential in it. We wandered through the place on our own, like excited kids. "Shall we go for it?" I asked, hesitantly. "You could make it beautiful" Karen replied, thoughtfully. "We'd have the money to do it up," I said. "And it's the sort of place that if we just wanted to come for a holiday and not have to do any renovation work, it's livable. So can we say that we'll have it?"

"Yes" she replied, with the most wonderful smile. "Let's take it, and call it our home"

We hugged in the bedroom of what was hopefully going to be our place. All that was left to be done was to get a Spanish bank account, and a mortgage, find a lawyer who could understand us, and the other minor hurdles that you come across when buying a strange house in a strange country, with no money, passport identification etc....

We had literally half a day left in which to do it all.

After a lot of chatting with the assembled estate agent, Karen2 as interpreter, the house owner and the daughter, we said that we wanted to buy it. For the first time, Pepe's eyes did not roll up to heaven, and there were smiles and handshakes all round. We agreed to meet Karen 2 the next morning at the bank before we went to the airport, then headed off with Jenny in her car, to Pepe 1's tapas bar in Monovar. All the way back, I kept thinking 'did we REALLY just buy that house?' Karen just kept looking at me, and squeezing my hand. I knew she was happy.

When we arrived, we were greeted by Pepe1 as if he was a long lost uncle, and were introduced to Craig's brother and his niece.

Then, we told Craig the news. In turn, he told Pepe1, and there were more hugs and kisses all round. And the food and drink flowed.

A few hours later, we said adios to our new friends. But before we went, Pepe1 gesticulated to us to wait, and he made us a presentation of a boxed bottle of 20 year old Fondillion as a gift. Such incredible people, and such generous hospitality.

I made a mental note to hold the biggest celebration party there if we were successful in purchasing our house, and to return some of Pepe1's hospitality.

On the way back to the house, we stopped at a roadside wine warehouse. These places were everywhere (there were two in the tiny village where our intended house was) and this one was a few hundred yards away from Craig and Jenny's house.

We simply could not believe it. Inside the warehouse huge vats full of wine confronted us, and shelves stacked full of bottles of wine, champagne, huge jars of olives, honey and marmalade. The wine started off at about 50 pence a litre for a palatable wine, up to a 20-year-old reserve wine for about £1.50. Champagne was a laughable £2.50 a bottle, but the piece de resistance was a wine that was over 120 years old. Every year, they drew off just 600 bottles of this wine, and numbered each bottle. Craig splashed out and bought one, for the equivalent of £17 for the bottle. Pure virgin olive oil was about £4.50 for a gallon. It was ridiculous. How on earth did they make any money? And why on earth was the wine so expensive when it hit our supermarket shelves?

That evening, we all had a barbecue out under the stars, and drank copious amounts of wine at an extortionate 80p per litre. I could get used to this life – a life where you do most of your living outside, at one with nature, instead of being huddled around a fire, or sitting in an unhealthy atmosphere with all the windows closed against the elements. I could certainly get used to the relaxed way of life too. I don't know whether it's the wine that gets to you, or whether you get totally intoxicated on the scenery, the people and the environment. But who cares? If you are going to live this life properly, there is no better place or climate to live it in.

The next morning, we went to the bank to meet Karen2. Even though it was a small town, the bank building was very plush. The main thing you notice is that it is also an extremely relaxed atmosphere. The staff and managers were in short sleeved shirts and casual trousers, and everyone who came in greeted us as if we were their friends.

We were introduced to someone who's name escapes me, and signed some forms. A few minutes later, we had opened a bank account, even though we had no money, and no identification.

Then, after a short wait, we were introduced to Antonio, the mortgage guy. Karen2 interpreted for us.

Don't ask how it happened, but just 30 minutes later, we had an 80% mortgage over ten years fixed at 4%, and had agreed to play in the local Petanque league in a Spain v England match the next time we were over there!

Before we had flown out, I had made enquiries in England about getting a mortgage for a property in Spain through an overseas property specialist. 2 months on, and we still hadn't got an English one. More forms to fill, more bits of paperwork to obtain, and more red tape. We did it in this so called peasant country in just half an hour.

Later that day, we headed off to Murcia Airport in Jenny's open top car, threading our way through the mountains via the pretty route. Now I know why people in hot countries don't all have open topped sports cars, and prefer to drive around in air-conditioned cars instead. As soon as we reached a decent speed, Karen was whipped to death by her hair, and I'm sure I lost even more of mine, ripped out by the buffeting wind. As soon as we stopped, we shrivelled up like prunes under the glaring sun.

After less than half an hour we were both soaked in sweat, even though the wind chill factor appeared to be keeping us cool. By the time we got to the airport we had been blown inside out and back to front. I was still picking the bugs out of my teeth, and Karen's long beautiful locks resembled a bird's nest in a thunderstorm.

But we didn't care. We said a fond goodbye to our friends, and headed off in the bucket shop airline back to blighty to try and rescue our car from the airport car park, for the 2-hour drive home.

Neither of us wanted to go. Although our initial trip to Spain had been somewhat of a nightmare that we wouldn't wish upon anyone, we will never forget the friendship of the people, and the lifestyle that this so called 'backward' country enjoys. We lost count of the number of fiestas that we were invited to when we came back, and the number of times that people showed us hospitality that we have never experienced in our lives before.

I think I can sum the Spanish people up quite simply. If they had nothing, they would still invite you to share it with them. We were truly humbled by their warmth and friendship.

And we'll always be grateful to Craig and Jenny, who helped us through our crisis, and helped us to find a house, whilst trying to live their own lives amongst the rubble of their project. They were truly magnificent. If it wasn't for them, God knows how we would even have begun to get through it.

We would now like to help you. As a result of our visit and our experiences, we were determined to share our life here with anyone who wanted to find out more about life in Spain, and to help them on their way - or if their Spanish Dream could never be realised, perhaps they could live it a little through us. If that is you, then relax and enjoy...

Or perhaps one day soon, you will invite us round to *your* home in Spain for a glass in wine in the sunshine.....

The Dream, v The Reality

Very soon, back in our home in England, with the central heating on in July, we quickly realised that we could not hope to supervise the building work from a distance. It soon became a nightmare. We were given the names of some English builders who were apparently working on some projects in the village and I chose them because I could at least communicate with them. Unfortunately, I very quickly found out the words 'cowboy builders' as we went from one disaster to another. The builder, a man named Mr Fisher had presented us with elaborate plans of what could be done, but that was about as far as it went. He quickly became known as Fisher-Price for his inability to build, and we quickly stopped the money from being drained from our account. We took on some more builders, this time Spanish, but managed by an English guy called Dave, but the same thing happened. A whole new roof was put on, only for the rain to come cascading down the walls and into the kitchen. The house was completely rewired, then the Spanish electric company came round to switch it on, and condemned it as totally wrong. The electrics would have been okay in a British house, but in Spain they have a completely different system!

And so it went on...for 8 months. And 8 months later we were no further forward than when we began, but around 30,000 euros worse off.....

Fate was about to deal a blow – one that we did not expect.

Karen was diagnosed with a life threatening illness. It threw us into turmoil. We were getting to the top of the tree with a telecoms company, and life was going great. We were looking forward

to spending a week here and there living the Spanish Dream, and to relax and unwind whenever we wanted to, but we were knocked sideways. It was Hobson's choice – carry on doing what we were doing, and build an incredible future for ourselves, whilst watching Karen slide downhill to god knows what, or stop completely. Funnily enough whilst we were searching for treatments, operations etc., we discovered that Spain had one of the best healthcare systems in the world, and they dealt with her kind of ailment very successfully. So we made the decision to try and continue to run our business from Spain, whilst getting private treatment for her under an eminent Spanish specialist, and helping her to get better. Money isn't important. Life is. It was as simple as that in the end.

We're going to move forward now, because we do not dwell on the past, and what might have been. We made our decision and we would get Karen better, which was the only thing that mattered at that time. Who knows? When she had recovered, perhaps we would be able to go back to being the superstars once more, back in the UK. As luck would have it, we were offered an alternative by a very generous, and very understanding person, which allowed us to carry on being financially independent. We thank this person from afar, every single day of our lives.

So the decision was made. We packed up the Nissan X-Trail with our possessions one morning, secured the dog in the back, and set off on the journey. A day later we turned up at our wreck of a home, ready to live our Spanish Dream. All in all we lived there for 8 months, taking in the peasant lifestyle and the totally different way of life, in amongst the hospital visits and the treatments, which eventually proved successful. We had clearly made the right move...Karen was restored to full radiant health. And we wanted to keep her that way. So we stayed in Spain, and attempted to do up the property for the next 8 months. Brick dust and noise wasn't ideal for her health, but the constant sunshine and beautiful scenery more than made up for it, and we spent much of the time visiting many places in Spain, enjoying the lifestyle and culture.

During our time in Torre del Rico, many things happened. We adopted a puppy that we found under a tree stump where his mother had given birth a few weeks before, but the rest of the litter had died. We heard the squeaking as we walked past, and had to investigate. This puppy was malnourished, and totally covered in fleas and ticks from head to foot, but we nursed him back to health. His mum hung around the courtyard for a while, then simply disappeared one day, once she knew her offspring was safe. We called him Martes (which means Tuesday in Spanish - goodness knows why because we found him on a Saturday) and that was shortened to Marty. He turned out to be a great family pet in every sense of the word.

We remember the time when Hugh, a Welsh neighbour went out with friends to the local bar in town, and got well and truly bladdered. To avoid the police, they took the back road to the village. It wasn't actually a road, more of a dirt track. As you get near the village there is a sharp bend which you need to negotiate to avoid a 100 foot sheer drop. They didn't negotiate it.... The good news was they were so drunk that they never felt a thing even though the car shot over the drop and rolled twice in the field at the bottom! To this day, I don't know how they escaped with just cuts and bruises. But they did, thank goodness. Their heads were the sorest part of their bodies the next day.

Talking about sore heads – we were told that there was a local bodega in the next village, who stocked some fabulous local wines. So we took a ride over. We soon found out that 5 litres (1 gallon) of the local wine cost 5 euros, and we tasted it. Very nice indeed! So we bought 2 containers of it for 10 euros.

That afternoon, we decided to partake of our recent purchase. So we filled the glasses, and sat in the shade of the courtyard in the warm afternoon, chatting and drinking.

The afternoon wore on. I vaguely recall filling the glasses again, but that was about all I can remember. The heat of the day led to dehydration, and we weren't quite sure about how much we were drinking because it was a big plastic container. On top of that, the wine was twice as potent as any that you can normally buy.....never again! It is no wonder that so many foreigners come to Spain where alcohol is so cheap, and they end up addicted to drink. Temptation is all around. It is easy to slip into that sort of lifestyle, and I am glad we learned our lesson in the early days. We only drink water in the day now. Karen has been tee-total ever since, and I enjoy a glass of wine or a whisky nightcap, but that's it.

We also attended the fiesta outside the one and only bar in the town. That was hilarious. The villagers began the proceedings by goading a young bull that had been tied to a long rope which we did not like one bit. The young macho men in the village kept jumping in front of the bull waving their arms, and running when the bull chased after them to the extent of his long rope before he was pulled back. But eventually the bull broke loose and got his own back, and ran through the bar, with everyone diving out of the windows to get out of its way. Then they had a firework display which was really hilarious. No health and safety here! The spent fireworks instantly set fire to the scorched grassland, and the villagers spent the next few hours protecting their homes with buckets of water and by forming a chain gang. It was a sight to behold.

You also have to be careful when you are learning the language. James, another English person in the village, was renovating his property. He was actually a competent builder and did a wonderful job, eventually building a new house from start to finish with his wife as his labourer. However, he sometimes used to pop into our one and only village bar for refreshment after a hard day's work. He tried to chat to the locals to get a better grasp of the language, but whenever someone asked him anything he didn't know what to say, so he always just said "si claro bien" which meant "okay, yes, good" as a rough translation. He had heard the phrase so decided to use it.

Anyway, a couple of days after one of his visits to the bar, a lorry turned up and deposited loads of rubble and cement on his doorstep, then demanded payment. It turns out that one of the villagers asked if he needed building material as he was doing up his house. James didn't understand, but just said his usual "si claro bien" The villager then asked him if he would like a load of hardcore and cement, and James again replied "si, claro, bien".....

There is something to be said for the peasant life. At times there is nothing like it, when the goats are herded down the main road with the bells on their necks tinkling, coupled with the sound of the church bells in the background against the backdrop of the setting sun on a warm evening, with the breathtaking mountains peeping through a heat haze, and the road shimmering in the distance.....



Conversely, when you are trying to run a business on a mobile phone in a place where there is no signal unless you stand on the monument in the main street and face west, to try and download a document or do a skype call....Our bills regularly hit 800 - 1000 Euros a month. The washing machine was our office desk. Cold showers are great in the heat of the summer, but in winter it is a different story. The boiler was outside, and the slightest puff off wind would knock out the pilot light. And we just couldn't keep the house clean as we lived in a dust bowl, where the wind whipped up every day causing the whole place to be covered in a film of dust. I think what really put the lid on this venture was the cowboy builders. I am no handyman. The family run a mile if I ever suggest that I would put up some shelves or do any other form of DIY, so we were well and truly stuffed. The last straw was when they attempted to do something to the dividing wall between our house and our elderly neighbour's house, and part of it fell down revealing them sitting in their kitchen eating their breakfast. The crazy thing was that the husband carried on eating his baguette, without batting an eyelid!

I felt quite embarrassed about the whole thing, but could not see what to do for the best. We wanted to stay in Spain, but didn't quite envisage that sort of lifestyle! Everywhere was like a lunar landscape – barren, rocky, dusty – and there really was nowhere to go at night, and nothing to do – no television, no internet, not able to do our business, no nothing. I don't like reading, so for me that was out too. I felt like I had put Karen into the back of beyond....we did not have this picture in our minds when we thought about coming to Spain!

One of the things we loved to do was to go out and explore the area, with no particular destination in mind. One beautiful Sunday morning, I suggested that we go out for a ride in the country to explore the area further afield. We were in the Murcia region, not far from the border with the Valencia region, and I had heard it was quite pretty there so we headed off into the hills. After about 45 minutes of driving, we came to the top of a range of hills, overlooking a huge valley. There below us, we saw what looked like the promised land. Instead of rocks, barren wasteland and dust, there were green fertile fields and miles upon miles of orange and lemon groves.



We could not believe our eyes. We travelled around for a while, and made a point to come back and check out the area more thoroughly, by looking on the internet, if the signal was any good. A week later we headed back to the area. We had truly found paradise! We came upon a town called Canals, parked up and walked down a real pedestrian precinct, with a paved walkway, and shops either side. We went into a café, and instead of a floor covered with peanut shells and sunflower seed husks, it was swept and tidy. Instead of the smell of sweat, brandy and cigarette smoke, the aroma of fresh coffee filled the air. The tables were full of people chatting. We started to get excited. "Look at my phone" Karen gasped "I've got a full signal!"

After a coffee and a sticky bun, we headed down the precinct, marveling at the sight of an actual real taxi, a take away pizza shop, and wait for it – a train station! We were like two people who had been transported into the future, stunned at the sight of people walking around in nice clothes, sitting at the pavement cafes, and the hustle and bustle of civilised life. We realised that inland Spain wasn't all donkeys and goats and tumbleweed. There was civilisation!

That was it. We were sold, and we were determined to move to the area, leaving the goats behind, to enjoy a proper life with the things that we know and were comfortable with. But it was going to take some doing....

We visited the area a few more times, after arranging to look at properties in nearby towns and villages. We checked out a few, but whilst they were a thousand times better than where we were, they just weren't right for us. Then one day, the English speaking estate agent called us, and said that something had just come on the market in a small town near to Canals, that we really should look at. Anything was better than sitting amongst the rubble and the piles of breeze blocks that the cowboys had created so we headed back to the area, to be met by Manuel. He explained in really good English that a house had just come on the market that was rather nice, and we needed to view it quickly, so we followed his car into the campo. We eventually pulled into the driveway of the house in question through the electric gates – and there it was. Our dream home.....

There were lawns laid to grass. There were sprinklers that watered the lawns, There was a swimming pool in the garden. There were trees and shrubs adorning the garden. There was a beautiful house, white, with Majorcan wooden shutters, and an outside terrace. We both instantly knew it would be our home, and that it was absolutely what we were looking for when we first thought about moving out to Spain.

The inside needed modernising as opposed to major renovation, but even without that, we could move straight in. There was central heating for the cold winter nights, and constant hot running water. And there was something called broadband!



Without further ado, we told Manuel that we wanted it, and would need to sort out finances. As we travelled back to the dust bowl and peasant village, we were filled with excitement along with a distinct sinking feeling that we had bought a house already, where much of our money had gone.....

We decided to go for it. Come hell or high water, we just knew that the house was meant for us, and we were meant to live there. At the time, we were writing a blog about the Spanish lifestyle, so I suggested to Karen that we advertise our ruin on there, I clearly remember writing out the description of the house with the enormous potential that it had for someone competent, and a colourful description of the quiet peasant lifestyle in the hopes that the renovation project and the life would appeal to someone. It was a real stab in the dark.

Then the craziest thing happened. We got a call the very same day that we placed the ad from a couple living in temporary accommodation. They said they were interested in seeing the property as soon as possible. That was on the Saturday. They drove over on the Sunday, and totally fell in love with the place, buying it on the spot! He was into renovation and it was exactly the project they were looking for. And I still can't believe to this day that we actually made a profit on the property, notwithstanding the Fisher-Price builders.....

Within a month we had tidied everything up, and packed up to move. We drove over to our new home, but as we hit the valley it started to rain. In fact it rained for the next fortnight, non stop. Had we been sold a pup? Is that why the valley was so fertile? Fortunately and thankfully, it turned out that it was a freak weather condition. Once the rain passed, we had 8 months of non stop sunshine, in our wonderful new home.

The best thing of all though was that we met a young English couple who had moved to the area a couple of years before. Tony had then taken up work with Spanish builders so that he could learn about the different techniques and the type of materials that they used, and then started up on his own. We decided to try him out with a few odd jobs, but quickly realised that he and his wife Joss were probably the most talented and gifted artistic people ever. His work was truly extraordinary, and the pair modernized our whole house over the next couple of years, in the unique style that we wanted. Here's the kitchen that he gutted and built from scratch as an example:



So we settled down to Spanish life in the sun, living the dream, enjoying every moment of our time together. Soon, the whole tribe came over – sons, daughters, fiancé etc. and we carved out a totally different way of life. A life that many hanker for. We also bought a house on the beach, and had a fishing boat on the Med. It was truly idyllic – paradise in fact.

Then I went and spoiled it.....

Roll the film forward, and a few years later the entrepreneur in me stirred once more..... We were too young to simply retire, and we were getting more and more concerned about the environment, along with the problems we were all causing. It was at the time when the world was suffering from the worst recession ever known, but notwithstanding that we decided to set up an eco friendly business, to do our bit. We also wanted to 'give back' in return for the fabulous lifestyle that we were living.

It seemed pretty simple – source some eco friendly products, and find some people to help promote them. We began with 6 cleaning products, and we asked some friends back in the UK to store them for us, and ship them out when required.

Within a year, we realized that we had created something very special. We also realised that there was no way we could run the operation from Spain, as things were going very wrong with regards to storage, deliveries, etc. so we had to move everything back to the UK – kids, horses, boats, cars, dogs, furniture, etc. Looking back, I realize that we don't do things by half! It was a huge undertaking, but it was undertaken, and to cut a long story short, we leased a farm complex in Norfolk. To date, we have over 1000 products, and rising, and we have sold several million pounds of eco products, which we are justifiably proud of.

Kate our daughter and her husband Drew now run the operation from the UK, and we spend most of our time back in Spain in the home that we love as we head towards a more leisurely retirement. Above all else though, it gives us the time to do what we want to do with regard to eco projects, as we will be exploring with you. Along the way, we can show you the modern Spanish way of life, and help you immerse in the lifestyle and culture of this wonderful country, as we explore all aspects of the way of life, and the eco projects that will be of great interest to so many.

Nowadays, there is nothing nicer than sitting on the terrace drinking a cup of freshly ground coffee with a sprinkling of cinnamon in the sunshine after a traditional English Sunday breakfast (we love boiled eggs, toast and honey or Marmite and freshly squeezed oranges).



The birds are singing and playing in the yucca tree. One of the hens is announcing the arrival of the latest egg, clucking and squawking. The bells in the ancient monastery in the valley below are ringing out, inviting the good people to share in the day's ceremony, and Juan can be heard coming up the road in his pony and trap, with all the bells on the pony's regalia jingling and tinkling. The dogs run to the fence excitedly, barking at the pony pulling the trap up the hill, but the pony takes no notice and carries on his journey, with Juan in his straw hat chewing on the stub of a cheroot. The air is filled with the heady scent of oranges and lemons, and at that time of the morning everything still has a slight freshness to it before the heat of the day sets in. In the campo (countryside) the farmers are tending their fruit trees in the hopes of a bountiful supply of olives, lemons, oranges etc., and the smoke from the bonfires in the fields hang over the valley in the still air.



Glorious – simply glorious. Having spent the last 5 years in the UK, we truly missed this wonderful way of life. It is a joy to be back here, in our real home. Karen is happy because she can commute back and forth to the UK any time she likes, to see her elderly parents, her daughter, and the grandchildren. It is very important for her to be able to hop on a plane when she wants, and be back there in a few hours, so we have that flexibility, which is so important. It is the best of both worlds.

We sit on the Moroccan terrace and muse awhile, then ponder about how to spend the rest of the day. The grass needs its first cut of the year, the geraniums need planting in the pots along the driveway, and the pool could do with a clean. Whatever – manana. It will still all be there to do tomorrow. Or we could go down to the beach house about an hour away and mess about down there for the day, taking in lunch at one of the fabulous restaurants on the coast. Instead, we decide to spend the day enjoying each other's company, and will have a fish barbecue later on, with perhaps a glass of wine or two from the local bodega. I still can't get over the price of so many things here – a bottle of 3 year old Crianza which would cost £7 or £8 in the UK but costs just 2 Euros here. And it really does go well with anything. Well, that's my theory anyway!

The evening will find us sitting on the same terrace as the sun goes down, with our dogs flaked out on the cool tiles, as we count our blessings for being able to have such a wonderful lifestyle following years of hard work.



We all have dreams, and our dreams are not the same as everyone else's – but at least we are living *our* dream, and we encourage you to do so too. Life really is too short, as we have discovered many times. Miles, our son tragically passed away just a few years back. He loved the Spanish life, and his ashes are now scattered under the huge cross on the mountain behind our home, so that he can look down on us, and we often raise a glass to him. Yes, life really is too short.....

Let's delve into the eco projects shall we? There's so much exciting stuff to get through, now we're up to speed on everything. A word of warning though – it's not all roses along the way. We share the highs and the lows!

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