

# EXPAT

WITH ANDY CHAPELL



Saints and virgins have been out in force on our expat's patch, but behind the pride and the pageantry lies a generation of youngsters for whom rejection is becoming the norm. Guernseyman Andy Chapell shares a taste of real life in rural Spain

## Pride and the pain

**E**ASTER processions. It's all about the passion. And Andalusia does passion big-style. Every day for the whole of Easter week, each self-respecting town of any size will take the statues of saints and virgins from their respective temples and parade them around the streets.

In Málaga and Seville these processions are followed by many thousands of people, with ensuing chaos to traffic, and of course you can forget getting much done in the business world.

Most happen at night and are accompanied by penitents, their pointed hats making them appear like members of the Ku Klux Klan. To add to the drama, in many places, including our local town of Ronda, the Wednesday night vigil is a silent one except for the clanking of chains on the cobbles.

The Spanish are lively and verbal people and it is really strange to experience a large gathering in total silence, save perhaps the occasional outpouring of emotion in a *saeta* – a religious song that satisfies people's need to communicate with God. Whatever your religious beliefs, on hearing these songs, the goosebumps will be felt.

As an incomer, it is very important to recognise the significance of these events to the local population. As a man, the greatest honour is to be one of the 60 or more who shoulder the weight of the floats for up to six hours at snail's pace up and down the streets. We have to give one of our chefs a few days off every year so he can participate and even for younger people, the strain on body and energy is immense. Their passion means that the pain is to be celebrated and endured.

The female role is the preparation and spectacular decoration of the floats with thousands of flowers. Many will also be dressed in mantillas and beautiful dresses, mostly in black, to recognise the sadness that permeates the events of the week. Not to be missed.



The penitents' pointed hats make them resemble members of the Ku Klux Klan. (v/Shutterstock)



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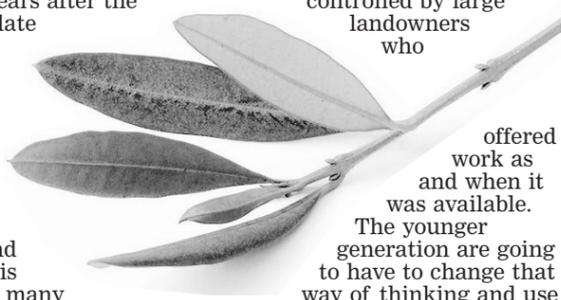
(Pabkov/Shutterstock)

Our village is small – just 1,800 people, according to the last census – and for most of them there is no desire to move anywhere else in the whole wide world. In the hunger years after the Civil War – the late '40s and early '50s – necessity drove many to seek work in Germany or other parts of Spain. However, the desire to return to the village and the community is very strong and many made that move back to their roots in the last 20 years as the economy boomed.

Of course the Spanish bubble, based mostly on construction and other projects, has well and truly burst and it is very sad to see young people here with little hope of employment. As a small business employing up to 25 people in our high season, we are seen as a possible place of work by these young folk.

Five years ago we were being sent applications on a daily basis, but had to turn them all away as our existing staff are very happy with the jobs they have and show no signs of moving on. But we have moved into a new phase now and it is noticeable that the applications are not arriving as they once did. If this was because there are lots of jobs available we could celebrate, but the reality appears to be that the young people have lost hope and do not see it as worth even applying any more. So many rejections and ignorals are hard to accept. The government seems to have

finally realised that entrepreneurship may be the way forward and is offering incentives to young people to start their own businesses. Traditionally, Andalusia was controlled by large landowners who



offered work as and when it was available. The younger generation are going to have to change that way of thinking and use more initiative if they are to be gainfully employed in the foreseeable future.

We get on well with our neighbours, perhaps because our policy has always been to employ local people whenever possible. This means that *vecinos* have a vested interest, knowing that someone from their family is benefiting, directly or indirectly, from these strange British people running a local hotel. But of course we are always outsiders and we accept that we must be reminded that although we run one of the most successful businesses for miles around, we are not infallible. In the early days it used to be testing. Whatever we did, we were doing it the wrong way. You don't plant those flowers, you don't water at that time of day, you shouldn't treat your

staff this way or that, you shouldn't declare this or that to the authorities, and so on.

Nowadays we are more respected, having shown that even Brits can do some things right, and generally we roll along just fine. Some people, though, can't let go and it is with a true sense of delight that encounters with locals always end in 'constructive comments'.

The olive pruning season continues – a satisfying and pleasurable job. Whenever our nearest neighbour appears, it is always great fun to try to guess what he will find to correct.

Recently, on a day of burning the smaller shoots, Juan appeared with a grin on his face. He helped me to drag branches to the fire and without asking – but it was fine – bundled up a large amount from one particular tree for himself that would serve as goat feed. Not all olive trees are the same, apparently. It seemed that for once I was to be exonerated and no mistake was to be found in my practices. He set off for home and I felt weird. My faith in human nature was rewarded, though, when he suddenly reappeared from behind a tree and told me a) I should be using a special tool for what I was doing which would halve the time the job would take and b) I should be cutting the logs in a different way – only *tontos* (stupid people) did it the way I was. Result – all is well

with the world order.

Is it just me who admires people who can find pleasure in the most repetitive of jobs and stay cheerful? Spanish labour laws mean that people tend to stay in the same job for many years, as staff lose all kinds of benefits if they move employers. There are pros and cons to this for both worker and employer, of which more another time.

We have three cleaners in our hotel and their cheerfulness as they prepare another breakfast table or set off to attack another bomb site of a guest room is extraordinary.

Cleaning is a hugely respected source of pride in our area and our biggest problem with staff is getting them to stop at a level of cleanliness that would far exceed the standards of any normal person.

But I have found a true saint. At Málaga airport, a normally unremarkable visit to the gents' was uplifted by hearing a cleaning woman singing as she polished the sinks.

Fifty per cent of readers will know that most gents' loos are not the most salubrious of places and I think that to maintain a pleasant demeanour at all while working in one would be admirable. But this woman was belting out a happy and tuneful rendition of something I recognised from a Spanish radio station, with a huge smile on her face and a cheery word for the customers. When did you last experience anything similar?

● With partner Pauline Elkin, Guernseyman Andy Chapell has run a successful small hotel in the Andalusian mountains for 25 years. [www.molinodelsanto.com](http://www.molinodelsanto.com).

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