

EXPAT

Andy's hotel and restaurant is located near Ronda in Andalucia. www.molinodelsanto.com. Special rates are available for readers – email andychapell@yahoo.co.uk



Come on you saints

In a country where children can expect just as many gifts on their saint's day as their birthday, it pays to think like a Guern. Which is why our Expat **Andy Chapell's** first-born had to be a Carmen...

GOT to be careful here. Don't want to upset anyone, but at the same time I have valuable information to pass on for a true Guern.

Rumour has it that the aforementioned strain of Channel Islander is, um, 'canny' when it comes to money. I am not suggesting that there is any hint of he or she being ungenerous or miserly, you understand. It is just that money is not to be wasted, especially if it has been hard-earned. So here is a valuable tip. When you have children born in Spain, reach for the Catholic calendar which lists the saints' days. There is at least one saint attributed to every day of the year.

As the time for the birth of your child approaches, consult the calendar to work out which are assigned to the days near the expected arrival and ask the mother of your child to arrange the birth to coincide with a day on which there is an agreeable saint's name.

Why the lack of free will when choosing your child's name, you may ask? Simple. It will save you money. True Guerns, of which I am proudly one, are now paying full attention.

The custom in Spain is to bestow all kinds of bounty upon a child, not only on his or her birthday but also on their saint's day. See the idea? Name your child after the saint whose day falls on their birthday and you halve your annual expenditure per child. Our eldest was born on 16 July, which just happens to be the day of the Virgin of Carmen and actually, both mum and I really liked the name, even before the accompanying bonus dawned on us. We chose it because it was Spanish, to reflect our new residence, and at the same time almost impossible for anyone in the old country to spell wrong. But there is another bonus which we did not realise 22 years ago. The Virgin of Carmen is the patron saint of mariners. In a country with so much coastline she is highly revered by many, and her day is celebrated perhaps more than that of any other saint.



The saint's day of the Virgin of Carmen is celebrated by fishing communities all over Spain – and the spectacle is magical.

If you are called José or Juana, or any of the other more common names, your saint's day will be marked with special meals and much congratulation from your family and friends, plus presents if you are a child. But not much else. However, if you are called Carmen you are very honoured because every year on your birthday, every fishing community holds the most wonderful and magical spectacle.

In each town the statue of the Virgin of Carmen, which will reside in the church nearest to the seafront, is taken at first light from the building by the 'mayordomos', a group of people chosen each year to honour the day.

The statue is processed on their shoulders through the streets of the town or village and accompanied by hundreds of local people, particularly those involved in any way with the sea. She will be dressed in special robes, usually an intricate cape of light colours, white and pale gold predominating to represent the purity of her being. Hundreds of flowers will decorate her float as she makes the journey.

Families will bring their newborn babies to see the procession and be blessed by the Virgin.

As the temperature rises, Carmen is returned to her temple for the middle of the day.

In the late afternoon, once the heat is off, the statue is placed upon another float and carried on the shoulders of a number of strong guys along the streets to the port, or just the beach, where crowds await her arrival. She is surrounded by flickering candles as dusk falls. The barefoot float-bearers traditionally wear white shirts, blue knee-length trousers and a red sash.

Out on the sea there is a floating platform, and with huge care

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and not a little pride, the statue is placed upon it and the local fishing and pleasure boats, all bedecked with candles too, close in to surround the ceremony. To the sound of boat sirens, the Virgin is taken out to sea in the encircling darkness, just the candles on dozens of boats



The fortuitously born (and named) fashion blogger Carmen Chapell Elkin, daughter of Expat columnist Andy Chapell.

and the float itself illuminating the scene. There is spontaneous applause and shouts of 'olé' as the time-honoured ritual is enacted for yet another year. After an hour or so on the water, the float returns and the statue is taken back to its church, mariners safe in the knowledge that they have honoured their patron. Unforgettable.

We are very lucky to live in a place where these traditions are still upheld and where their magic continues to hold people spellbound. Whatever their religious beliefs, something spiritual is communicated to every spectator fortunate enough to witness the event. Our second daughter was born in February on the day of St Moses. She has ended up being more expensive...