

EXPAT

Fair play

Move over, Facebook - in rural Spain, the real networking goes on at the twice-yearly fairs that pay homage to patron saints, says **Andy Chapell**. And the real winners? The clothes shops and hairdressers that supply the obligatory finery...

IT'S party time. Twice a year, every community in this area of Spain lets its hair down to celebrate the days of its patron saints. For our village, one is 25 April - the Day of Saint Mark. This is not just a red-letter day - it's more of a strong vermilion tone, the depth of colour with which Lady Macbeth's little hand would incarnadine the multitudinous seas. Our staff battle it out every year, working out months ahead who will have that Sunday as a day off. Since the celebrations go on all night on the Saturday, literally until dawn, the free Sunday is the greatest prize. The day starts with Mass and then the procession of the statue of the saint at shoulder height on a flower-bedecked float through the village. This is undertaken by six organisers - the mayordomos - stopping for rests where householders lay out refreshment tables. The mayordomos are appointed each year and will have been working the whole 12 months to raise the money to fund the event. A minimum of 2,000 euros is needed to cover the costs and in a village of 1,500 people, this is not an easy task. The day continues with music and food at lunchtime - all provided free so that no one need be left out - followed by games and chat to fill the afternoon hours. Then it's home for a quick change before heading off to celebrate again.

Where the energy comes from is a mystery. All ages, from toddlers to grandparents, are out in the village square and surrounding streets, day and night. Roads are closed off, merry-go-rounds and bouncy castles spring up like so many autumnal mushrooms and stalls selling all kinds of sometimes-dubious food are plying their wares. Nearer dawn, they are joined by the churros stalls selling smoky, olive-oil-laden tubes of dough to be dipped in the sweetest and stickiest hot chocolate imaginable. Europop blasts out from live bands under the stars and simmering relationships among the young are finally declared publicly as the courtship rituals of centuries are re-enacted. Facebook may be an important social tool but the local *feria* is where the real issues are sorted. The real winners during these celebrations are the clothes shops and the hairdressers. They are inundated with customers keen to parade in their finery and show that even in these recessionary times, some traditions need to be respected. Flamenco dresses are de rigueur for many, and daughters as young



Flamenco dresses are de rigueur, whatever your age.

(SandiMako / Shutterstock)

Guernseyman Andy and his partner, Pauline, run Hotel Molino del Santo in the Andalucian village of Benaolán, near Ronda. In 2013, the hotel is a TripAdvisor winner for the fourth year in succession. For more, go to www.molinosdelosanto.com or email andychapell@yahoo.com.

as a year old wearing miniature versions of them may be paraded in pushchairs. To miss the festivities is unthinkable, so for those who need to work, Sunday mornings can be a little quieter than usual. It's just a question of getting through to the next chance to grab a siesta and recoup some of that lost sleep.

Seeing the older generation get involved in the party is a reminder that the concept of old people's homes is, for the most part, a foreign one in this area. The

combination of a healthy diet, clean air and less stress means many people in our village are in their 80s and 90s, yet still manage to live at home. They are visited many times a day by their neighbouring younger relatives, who offer domestic assistance. The strangest ritual happens just before lunchtime, when women are to be seen scurrying along the village streets, heading in all directions, each clutching a saucepan or cooking pot. This is Benaolán's version of Meals on Wheels - albeit on a more local scale. Many

families will prepare extra amounts of the lentils or chickpea casserole that is to be their midday meal and someone is sent off with a portion to be passed on to elderly relatives. Later in the afternoon, the pots are returned - often by grandchildren, who take their chance of being rewarded with money for sweets from the local shops. Incidentally, food has changed little here over the generations and a straw poll among our contacts showed that 80% still have lentils with chorizo every Monday lunchtime, with

haricot beans a regular feature each and every Thursday. And very delicious it all is.

'The concept of old people's homes is, for the most part, a foreign one in this area'

You may not fully appreciate it if you live on the island, but Guernsey are a very well-mannered lot. I still find it hard to take when I reverse to let a driver pass in the narrow lanes of these Andalucian mountains and I don't even get eye contact, let alone a friendly acknowledgement. And last week, during a family visit to my roots, as I strolled along the cliff path near Icart, I was astounded to find a sweet wrapper tucked in among the celandines and bluebells - astounded because it is thankfully rare to find litter so carelessly discarded in Guernsey. In Spain, too much of the countryside appears to be perceived as a very large rubbish bin and the evidence is all around. I am always amused to come across picnic spots that have been used by the local Spanish, maybe 3km from the nearest human habitation in a beautiful rural location. Sometimes the rubbish has just been left all around but quite often someone has gone to the trouble of collecting it, putting it in a plastic bag and then carefully tying the bag to the nearest tree. I would love to know what is supposed to happen to those bags. They could remain there for generations. Perhaps an even better example of the differing cultures is shown by the story of a young English woman who worked for us years ago. In her 20s, as a student, Claire remembers being hailed in the street by some young men who very unaggressively told her that because she was in student garb of jeans and tee shirt, and it was festival time, she was 'fea' - ugly. It was not meant unpleasantly - it was just straight advice. I am not suggesting you try the same this coming Bank Holiday Monday on the Albert Pier - or anywhere else in the Bailiwick, for that matter...

