

# EXPAT



Buying a ruined mill and converting it into a successful business was only one of the leaps of faith taken by **Andy Chapell** and his partner Pauline back in 1986. Being accepted into the rural community was as important as making a go of their hotel...



Molino del Santo as it is today, and (right) as it looked back in 1986, when Andy Chapell and Pauline Elkin bought it.

## Village people

**N**EEED a cure for insomnia? Book into our hotel and sign up to hear me explain the story of how our life in Spain started. All will be revealed in the space of 45 minutes and 45 slides of a PowerPoint presentation – it will seem like hours of your life dragging by as you hear of our struggles and strife.

Last night when I was re-telling the story, someone asked how accepted we were by the local people when we first arrived and how we are viewed nowadays.

It is relatively easy to answer the first part of the question. In the first few years of our project to convert a ruined watermill into a small hotel we worked more hours than there are in a day, week after week. In the early days it was a lot of physical labour – sorting out abandoned gardens, helping builders and other tradesmen to get the project completed on time, painting, cleaning – all activities which local people understood. When you do that kind of work in the summer temperatures of Andalucia, day in and day out, your neighbours, most of whom earn their living from the same struggle with the land, are bound to think you're not bad folk.

The fact that we also spoke

the language from the very beginning, especially my partner, who had a Spanish degree, meant that communication was open and we could share our frustrations and delights about our new-found home. Add to this that we needed a fair number of staff from the earliest days to do cleaning and preparing jobs once the hotel was open, and we were on a fairly favourable wicket.

We had a policy in the early days of always employing local people and because there was so much unemployment, and exploitation of those who were in work, we were welcomed by most.

We employed three very hard-working sisters from one family back in the late 1980s and two of them are still with us nearly 30 years later. The third got involved with a macho Spaniard who couldn't cope with the fact that her wages were more than his, and made her life in the job impossible.

**T**hrough the middle years of our time here we enjoyed our lives with our two wonderful daughters, who also opened all kinds of positive doors for us. They were always bi-lingual and bi-cultural and enjoyed their contact time with our village neighbours. To give you an idea of how well-

accepted we were, our elder daughter, aged two, slept in a double bed between two of our Spanish friends the night we had to rush to hospital for the birth of her sister.

These were also years of a lot of hands-on effort in the restaurant and hotel which meant people continued to see us grafting away, as well as juggling the everyday demands of a young family. Once again we were living a life that many of the locals could identify with.

**'It's interesting that many of our cooler relationships tend to be with other expats in the area whom we have clashed with over various issues through the years'**

Obviously lots of English friends and family came to visit and there were times when we were unable to mix as much as we might have liked with our Spanish friends. However, family life is the driving force of society here so we always felt they understood that those visits were a priority for us and accepted this.

More recently, the goalposts may have moved as we have become less hands-on, spending more time planning and managing – and just getting older. But providing stable employment and behaving in a decent way to our staff and suppliers over the years has earned us ongoing respect. Of course it has not all been a bed of roses, and some local people are not our best friends. In a small community – there are fewer than 1,800 people in Benaioján village – some conflict is inevitable. Into this category would fall the families of people we had to ask to leave our employ because of unpunctuality or unreliability. Recently we have found that this extends to people we interview but do not offer a job to: many families will take this as a personal slight. There are also those in the community who do not get on with anyone outside their immediate family and when you realise this, it is easier to

accept the total ignoring that goes on. Maybe this would happen in any community and Guernsey readers may well identify with some of these issues.

However, I find it interesting that many of our cooler relationships tend to be with other expats in the area whom we have clashed with over various issues through the years.

Why should this be? I suspect part of it is because we are perceived to be very successful and perhaps a touch of jealousy creeps in. There are a lot of non-Spanish people who retired to our area, and for a few of them inflation and exchange rates have meant that their pension plans were not quite as lucrative as they imagined years ago.

There are also some lonely expats around with a lot of time on their hands, who take offence when we choose not to spend as long talking – and maybe getting drunk – as they would like. We have to accept that just because we share a common language, we don't necessarily share the same ideals.

But these are minor conflicts, and I sleep easily most nights. The days of needing a full-time bodyguard have not arrived quite yet.

● Andy's hotel and restaurant is located near Ronda in Andalucia.

[www.molinodelsanto.com](http://www.molinodelsanto.com).

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Email [andychapell@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:andychapell@yahoo.co.uk).