

THE TIMES

Where they still know how to really live

Rules are made for breaking in the laid-back mountain town that Chris Thomas calls home

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THE Sierra de los Filabres rise 2,000m (6,560ft) above Almeria province, wide, empty and threatening to turn to desert. The summits still collect enough snow to turn the valleys green in spring and leave puddles in the Almanzora River, but the pine forests struggle. Locals say that 50 years ago an earthquake changed the climate and stopped it raining.

The area's spiritual heart is Serón, home of the best serrano ham in Spain — something to do with the bone-dry air — and the worst-accented Spanish in the world. It is where I live. I do so because it is not on the costas. At 650m above sea level (more than 2,000ft), the summers are divine and the winters not cold enough to kill the palms.

Serón lived off iron ore and nearly died after the last of its mines closed in 1968. The population crashed from 10,000 to 3,000 and has never recovered, so most of the inhabitants have been anchored for generations. Everybody is surrounded by cousins and nieces. When there is a wedding half the town goes.

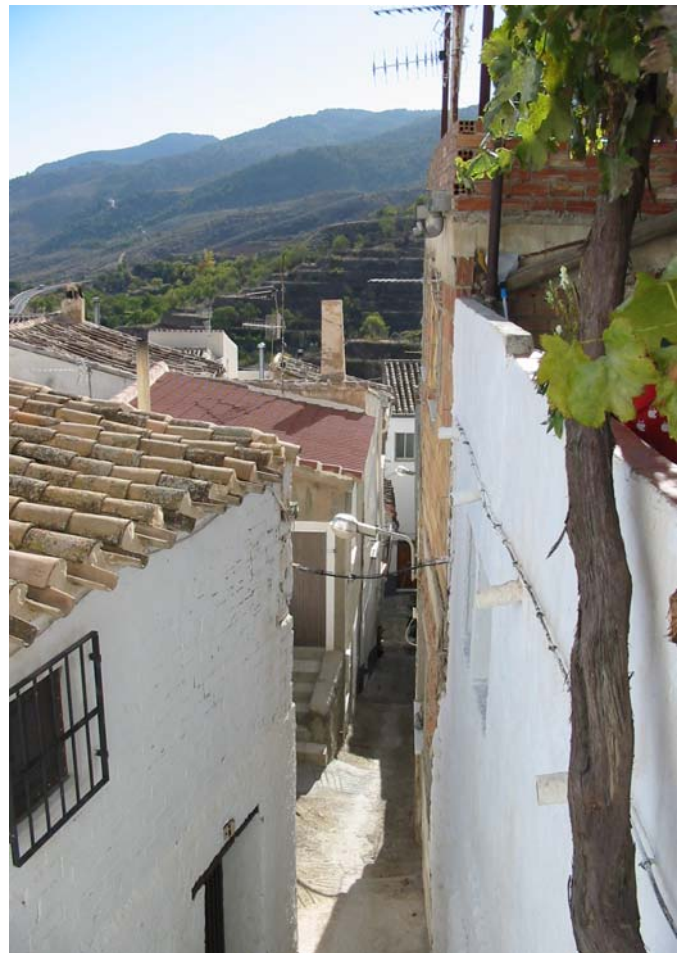
The eternal mystery is how people live off olives, ham, sheep and goats. But live they do, high and well. Market day is Friday, when practically everybody decamps to the centre of town to buy vegetables, chickens, sweets, shoes and shirts — and pirated CDs from a man from Senegal. He displays them on a sheet on the ground and the local policeman also eyes them with a view to buying.

Spain hates rules. I like that very much. The law regulates smoking in bars but all eight watering holes in Serón — most of them rough — ignore it. Guardia Civil officers take coffee and cigarettes in them as if telling Madrid what it can do with its regulations.

Licensing hours are theoretical. As long as there are customers, bars are open. Wearing a seat belt or crash helmet is optional and you would have to break the sound barrier to receive a speeding ticket. It feels free.



This is a million miles from spying CCTV. There is no glass between customers and the man in the bank, and the woman at the post office tosses the money into an open drawer within arm's reach of the front counter but has yet to lose a cent.



Brits generally move to Spain because of the climate, cost, congestion and crime. The last three can disappoint them. Costs on the costas are not dramatically lower than in Britain any more, congestion is terrible and crime is soaring because of organised foreign gangs that raid 20 homes a night. Costa crime, like mosquitoes, does not reach up here.

High in Los Filabres, an abandoned mining town, Las Menas, government-owned and part of a national park, crumbles slowly. There is nothing there nowadays, save for a bar that used to be the mineworkers' hospital, and a small hotel for occasional trekkers — the old mining headquarters.



Las Menas

180° view from Seron's castle ramparts over the Rio Almanzora valley



Go into the countryside up there and soon you will be alone. Walk for an entire day and you will meet nobody. You can see for 160km (100 miles). The world is yours. I could not live without it.

Nor could I live without its opposite. Almería is an hour's drive from Las Menas, on the other side of Los Filabres — a real town with cinemas, the theatre and bars without stainless steel counters, throbbing televisions or 1,000-watt fluorescent lighting. Or, to the west, there is Granada. I prefer them to Manchester and Nottingham because you do not get mugged by drunken women.

The region where I live is known as High Almanzora. The people are rooted, confident and alive. They like ham festivals, religious festivals and just-for-the-hell-of-it festivals. My section of town — 17 houses — has its own patron saint, who once a year is carried on a stretcher from his own chapel, the size of a shed, and paraded around.

The priest turns up, a dreadful rock band is hired, a bar is set up and the square fills with old and young who dance soberly until dawn. Spain without noise would not be Spain. Some of the local motorcycle yobs turn up and they are not yobs at all. They drink Coca-Cola and call you "sir". The social changes shaking Spain have not reached here yet, where community and family are intact and the priest still has work.

I spent my first two years in Spain in Seville, attracted by its arrogant charms and determined to make it my home. I might have fared better had I been able to ride a prancing horse, play flamenco guitar, force a bull bloodless to its knees or dance in bum-hugging trousers shouting "olé". Spain's fourth biggest town did not work for us. The fourth smallest, or thereabouts, does. I feel I know half the town. Few ask my name because they fear it will be complicated, so I am El Inglés.



I marvel at their fierce politics, always far left or far right and argued at sonic-boom volume. Their jokes are filthy and frequently involve priests. They are not polite: your change is slammed on the counter, motorists never wave a hand in thanks, please and thank-you are rationed. But you will never find warmer people, unless you refuse to learn their language, which seriously aggravates them.

If you have a child, hearts and doors open to you. I know of a Spaniard who kissed an unknown child on the cheek in England and was arrested for child molestation. He fled home and told everybody that England was sick.

Spain is its children, who are indulged, spoilt, noisy and uncontrollable. Blessed childhoods produce confident adults who shout their politics and opinions from the rooftops and go to war for them. But there are no vandalised phone booths, old people are not fearful of walking in the streets, nor is there any sense of things getting worse.

I have been 27 years out of England, seven of them in Spain and four of those here. This is as close to home as it gets.

Chris Thomas



the pathways group

The Pathways Group is refurbishing an 18th century water mill near Seron into a residential development centre, opening in summer 2007. The Pathways team will use the superb environment in the area to offer a range of corporate leadership and management development programmes, together with outdoor pursuits and leisure activities. For more information, visit www.pathwaysgroup.co.uk.