

# Go native and enjoy the good life in Spain

Look away from the costas and you can still find a home in the 'real' Spain, reports Tony Jefferies

**R**EALLY, it's enough to give a Spanish estate agent nightmares. First the market slows down, then the bad publicity kicks in: homes bulldozed on the Costa Blanca, tough building restrictions in rural Andalucía — and then there's Marbella, where things are so bad that the mayor's in jail awaiting trial on property-related corruption charges.

But before the whip-round for penniless developers gets too far, it's worth noting that the growth in nationwide property values last year was still 17 per cent, and that up to 70,000 Britons bought in Spain during 2005.

Most are still investing on the costas, but increasingly they are looking away from the hotbeds of 'Spanglish' culture and going deeper into Spain.

The new breed of expats — though they wouldn't thank you for using the phrase — spurn 'Britain by the Med' with its clubs, dinner parties and bars serving full English breakfast.

Instead, they are looking to areas where you can't get by without learning Spanish, and also where property markets are buoyant but you can still get excellent value for money.

Barcelona and the Costa Brava have been big hits with British buyers for years. But with two-bedroom apartments in the city heading up towards £300,000 and prices on the coast going through the roof, new areas are opening up.

The areas of the Pla de l'Estany, Garrotxa and Ripollès north and west of Girona have until now been just too far away to tempt Barcelona weekenders, so prices have been lower.

British buyers have also been put off because the draw for them is the Mediterranean. But transport

improvements are changing the market fast. The motorway connecting the area to the main coastal *autovia* will be finished next year. And when the TGV train link opens in two years' time, Girona will be only 20 minutes from Barcelona.

Ella Fryer of The Property Finders consultancy says: 'There is a buzz from those who work in Barcelona about the possibility of moving out to the area and commuting — Spanish and British.'

Good deals are still around. A restored, three-bedroom house in the lakeside town of Banyoles costs around £200,000 while a small farmhouse set in an acre of land near Olot is around £550,000.

'Shortage of rental accommodation makes finding tenants easy and country properties are also sought after for holiday lets which can give a better yield,' Fryer says.

Alex Vaughan of estate agent Lucas Fox agrees. 'As the area opens up, a different breed of British buyer is looking to move in.'

'They want something a little more remote and want to integrate. Prices are cheaper inland, but they are rising quickly.'

Across Spain, the market is bubbling equally well in another area Britons are just discovering.

The city of Jerez de la Frontera in western Andalucía is known as the home of sherry. But it's gaining another reputation as the centre of a property hotspot focused on the region's white towns, or *pueblos blancos*.

The Costa de la Luz — southern Spain's Atlantic coast — has been a growing favourite with British buyers for some years. The high-rise overkill of the neighbouring Costa del Sol is alien to this area, with its planning restrictions and



## A new challenge beckons

PHILIP and Deborah Harker sold up in South London and moved to Catalunya in 1999. They wanted a better way of life for their baby son, Tomas (now seven), and north-east Spain fitted the bill.

'Deborah's parents had a house in Catalunya, so we knew the area around Girona,' says Philip, 39. 'We wanted to integrate, learn Spanish and live within reach of the beaches and the Pyrenees. We bought our house very quickly — even though it was a ruin.' Philip didn't know one end of a drill from the other when he left Britain, but the former recruitment consultant has spent the past seven years learning from local builders as he restored their farmhouse, and worked on others.

The Harkers and their expanded family (Max, three, and Lillana, two) are getting ready to leave Mas Aliu, their grand, traditional stone house set in five acres of woodland near Becano, west of Girona. 'We're not leaving the area — we just want another project, a new challenge,' says Philip.

■ MAS ALIU is for sale at €900,000 (£622,000) through Lucas Fox: 00 34 933 562 989; [www.lucasfox.com](http://www.lucasfox.com).

natural parks. Even so, those who want a more authentic Spain are moving inland. Towns like Arcos de la Frontera, Medina Sidonia and even Lebrija, just south of Seville, are opening up to foreign markets.

And if inland Catalunya is good value, inland Andalucía is astounding. Modern townhouses in Arcos start at around £100,000, but for the real deal, the old town is the place to head. You can still buy small unmodernised apartments for £50,000, but better still there are revamped gems studded across the town's famous cliff-top.

holiday homes,' says owner Chris Mercer. 'I'd be disappointed if these properties didn't increase in value by 40-45 per cent within two years.'

Further east, the area around Antequera, north of Malaga, is booming.

This is the crossroads of Andalucía, where motorways linking Seville, Cordoba, Malaga and Granada meet, so it's no surprise that prices here are rising — though they are still lower than on the Costa del Sol.

The best buys are in the area north and east of Antequera, towards Granada and the Subbética mountain range.

Even here, prices have doubled in the past three years and it's hard to find a *finca* because of restrictions on building in the countryside. To buy and renovate a rural property now you would need close to £250,000.

Barbara Wood, The Property Finders' Andalucía expert, says: 'You can see very ordinary houses, but good, well-located properties are difficult to find and more expensive.'

The market is very lively and prices are surging. Locals get excited and rack up the prices though — as always — there's a consolidation period. But good quality rural property which is fully legal, is accessible, has electricity and water is really rare.

'Antequera is a class act and prices in the area are very solid. The notion of cheap and cheerful is way out of date there.'

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## The race is on to restore our farmhouse ruin



GARETH and Fiona Speechley took the plunge last year when they bought a tumbledown *masia*, or farmhouse, near Girona.

The Speechleys and baby Eli are living in a small house on their land while they turn their ruin into an international triathlon training centre.

'It's an ambitious project, but we should be ready for business in a year,' says Fiona, who, like Gareth, has competed in triathlons at international level. 'We're restoring the house, building a 25m pool and laying out our five acres for cycling and running. But lifestyle was just as important for us.'

'We're an hour from the Pyrenees, close to the sea and it's a perfect environment for Eli to grow up in.'

**O**NE BRITISH couple, for example, are selling a house split into two stylish two-bedroom apartments with a stunning roof terrace for around £170,000.

Up in the mountains, prices are lower still. For £230,000 you can buy an enormous town house in the centre of the pretty town of Olvera. And £15,000 more is enough to secure a *finca*, or farm, on the outskirts of the town.

In Lebrija, foreign buyers are unknown, but that's changing. British estate agents Mercers are selling two developments of town-houses — one with a shared pool — at prices from £95,000.

The town is well connected by rail and road to Jerez and Seville and the beach is only 25 minutes away.

'British investors are seeing the potential both for buy-to-let and as