

**A CHANGE
OF
LIFESTYLE**

(Moving to Spain)

by

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WANTING A WARMER WINTER CLIMATE

Escape From Bronchitis

In the great year of the Millennium, after spending the previous two winters with my sister Mal at her home in Brisbane, Australia, I realised that to permanently get away from my winter bouts of bronchitis I needed to leave the UK for a warmer winter climate. The most obvious thing for me to do, of course, was to return to the Brisbane area of Australia where the summers are hot and the winters warm, so for this I began to prepare.

I wasn't completely sure that the answer to my problem was Australia, though, as it was so far away from everything I was used to in my precious England, also I had found the Australian summers to be extremely hot.

Smoking - A Complication

However, a complication in this plan to overcome bronchitis was that I was a heavy cigarette smoker, having regularly smoked since joining the Metropolitan police cadets at the age of sixteen. At that time and throughout my working life, in the male environment that I worked in all the men were expected to smoke and non-smokers were looked upon as being softies. Naturally, the heavy smoking and the bronchitis did not sit well together, so I determined once again to 'pack up smoking'.

For me, stopping smoking was very difficult as I was a complete addict, but the pain and distress that the bouts of bronchitis were causing forced me to take positive action. After a full and frank discussion with my doctor I commenced a six weeks course of nicotine 'patches' and finally managed to kick the habit. Mind you, the patches were costing me more than the cigarettes had done, so with an eye on the cost I dispensed with them after three weeks and have not smoked since.

Preparing To Move

Having dealt with the smoking problem, I then put all my energies into preparing to move to Australia and found this to be a mammoth task. First of all I had to arrange to rent my bungalow out as I didn't want to sell it until I was sure I wanted to stay in Australia - and this had unexpected complications. I had intended renting it fully furnished but the renting agent advised me against this.

He indicated that I would only get the same amount of cash if I rented it furnished or unfurnished and that it was better to rent it unfurnished and free of all electrical machines and garden tools. The reason for this being, that if I left kitchen machines and garden tools in situ they could break down and I would be liable for their repair or replacement. On the other hand, if the persons renting supplied their own equipment, they would be responsible for its maintenance. I followed his advice and had such a derisory quote from a dealer for my possessions that I gave them all away to family and friends. I actually had some very nice furniture and possessions, so they were quickly snapped up.

Glad to say, my bungalow remained rented to one couple for the whole two years before I sold it - but I made not a penny on the rent! What the agent didn't take in costs, the tax man relieved me of. Fortunately, the value of the bungalow increased during those two years so my loss was not too great.

A SPANISH ADVENTURE

Helping Out Carole Anne

While preparing for my move to Australia, my eldest daughter Carole Anne welcomed me into her large Victorian house in Cheshire. This was a move that had completely unexpected consequences.

Carole Anne dreamed of owning a holiday home in the Mediterranean and, whilst I was staying with her, she persuaded me to fly to Spain and check out the possibilities on the Costa Blanca, which I spent a month doing.

Alicante & Benidorm

I first of all stayed a week in a pension in the centre of Alicante and looked at the possibilities of buying a holiday property in that city, but eventually decided against it as the area was too vibrant and busy.

I next caught the train to Benidorm and that almost blew my mind. The town was in the middle of a special fiesta and heaving with Spanish tourists from the north of Spain, so much so that I had great difficulty in getting a room in a hotel. However, I managed to stay in Benidorm for a week and explored the immediate area of the old town and the two beaches, but again found it all too crowded and busy for a quiet holiday home.

Then Things Went Wrong

By this time I was feeling exhausted and rather lonely so decided to head for Denia, which was about a two hour journey further north and a town that I was told was more peaceful. With great relief I left my two star hotel in Benidorm, carried my suit cases the mile to the railway station as I couldn't get a taxi, boarded the local train and set off on the uncomfortable journey to Denia

That was when things went wrong! The train broke down at Calpe and I was forced to disembark.

Abandoned In Calpe

Calpe railway station is in the heart of the country, well away from the town and after leaving the train I found myself to be alone on the platform. I felt completely abandoned and had no idea where to go. I was exhausted and close to panic, but fortunately a rickety old bus chose that moment to chug up to the station.

Boarding the bus I put myself in the hands of the driver and he eventually dropped me off in the town, half way up what was commonly called 'cardiac hill'. This is a very steep hill and I lugged my suitcases further up it to the local Information Centre where I hoped to find details of good hotels, only to find that it was closed! Completely exhausted and in total exasperation, I then stepped out into the main street and hailed the first taxi that came along.

A Change Of Luck

This was where my luck changed for the better! The taxi driver was English and, after hearing of my urgent need for a decent bed, drove me to The Esmeralda Hotel on the outskirts of Calpe Town. There I received a welcome by the young female Spanish receptionists that could only have been bettered by my own daughters. They spoke English for a start and treated me like they would their own grandfather.

They first of all allocated me a beautiful room with all conveniences, including a telephone that I could use to ring England. Then, upon hearing that I had travelled there by public transport they admonished me for being so unwise and insisted on arranging a hire car for my future use. Last of all, after arranging for my luggage to be taken to my room, they sat me in a comfortable lounge and produced a large pot of English tea for my enjoyment. They certainly saved the day for me and I looked upon them as angels.

Having drunk the whole pot of tea and calmed myself down, I then went to my room and telephoned Carole Anne in England. I was feeling very alone and to hear her voice was sweet music to my ears. The friendly receptionists then made the remainder of my stay in Spain a pleasure and I kept my room at the Esmeralda until I eventually returned to the UK.

Searching For A Holiday Home

Having settled into the Esmeralda I explored the area around Calpe, looking for a suitable holiday home for Carole Anne and found plenty that could suit her, but by the time I returned to her home in Cheshire she had changed her mind and wished to buy an old farmhouse in the Canneries!

I declined her suggestion that I should do a similar check in those islands - and to date she has not extended her property portfolio abroad.

A FINAL DECISION

Spain V Australia

One good thing did come out of my trip to Spain, however, I finally made my mind up where I wanted to settle for the rest of my life – and it wasn't Australia.

Despite regular internet contact whilst I had been on the far side of the world, I missed personal contact with my children. It took over twenty-six hours to travel from the UK to Australia, a journey not to be taken lightly for its distance or its cost, whilst the flight from Spain to any English airport took just over two hours. Should I fall ill or if an emergency occurred with my children whilst I was living in Australia, it would be a major event and very costly for either party to visit the other.

Spain, on the other hand, could be easily reached in a couple of hours and at low cost, so visits for pleasure or in an emergency were viable. At the same time, the winter climate on the Spanish Mediterranean Coast was mild and would be just as kind to my bronchitis as the winter in Australia.

It was therefore obvious where I should settle and that was in Spain. The only further decision to be made was where in Spain I intended to spend the rest of my life - and that turned out to be the Costa Blanca.

THE MOVE TO SPAIN

Physical & Emotional Difficulties

To say that this was easy would not be true. Not only was there the physical side of the move but there was also the emotional side of leaving England as well. So, upon returning to my daughter's home in Cheshire, I worked hard at getting everything ready for the journey and for my initial stay out of the UK.

There were all sorts of things to arrange including informing my bank etc of the move, servicing my car for the journey and deciding what clothes and possessions I should and shouldn't take. The loading of the car was made more complicated as I was taking a considerable amount of my better household goods to Toulouse in France for use by my son, David, who lived there. I eventually set off for Spain and arrived in that country on the thirty-first of September 2001.

Avoiding Thieves & Robbers

One major consideration was the avoidance of thieves and highway robbers on my journey along the motorways of France and Spain at any stops I had to make, so to overcome this problem I took special precautions. Firstly I sailed to France on an overnight ferry with my fully loaded car securely parked in the hold. Then, upon arrival in France I headed straight for Toulouse by the quickest route, stopping only to answer the calls of nature or fill up with petrol. On these stops I took the precaution of obtaining my petrol, then using the toilet inside the service station whilst my car was still on the pumps and in full view of the attendants.

For refreshments I used what I had brought with me in the car and again parked in a well used part of the service station, but where I had a view all around the car to prevent interference with the tyres. (It was quite common at that time and still is today for highway robbers to puncture a tyre of a car parked in the service station, then follow the car onto the motorway and offer assistance in changing the tyre. Whilst one robber charitably helps in this act his partner steals whatever is available from the car, usually the bag containing cash and passports etc.)

Upon arrival at the home of my son in Toulouse during the evening of the same day on which I had left the port, so avoiding the probability of theft from the car if I had stayed in a cheap hotel with no secure compound, I emptied my car of all personal possessions and was able to relax.

To say that my son was delighted with the household goods that I had brought him would be an understatement and he still has many of them in his home today. After a stay of one week I then continued my journey to the Coast Blanca, only this time all my possessions were out of sight in the boot of the car and I escaped the attention of any highway robbers.

My son now lives near St Jean de Luz, a quaint Basque fishing port between Biarritz and the Spanish border where, set in beautiful countryside at the end of the Pyrenees and only a short distance from the coast, he has a lovely guest house (<http://www.unxinalde.com>). I find this much more convenient than Toulouse for a relaxing stay when driving to or from the Channel Ports.

SOJOURN IN CALPE

Arrival

My arrival in Calpe was very different from my previous one a few months before. Not only did I now know the layout of the land and where to stay, but I had my own transport and so was not dependent on the creaky public Spanish systems. Needless to say I headed straight for the Esmiralda Hotel, where I knew I would receive a warm welcome.

My expectation about the Esmiralda came true and I was received by the young Spanish receptionists with open arms. They again allocated me a lovely room with all conveniences and ensured that I had transport and everything else that I needed, then, when all our business was done, they arranged for a large pot of tea to be sent up to my room. Oh, with being so far away from home and on my own, how I found the attention of those girls so comforting for the next few months while I stayed at their hotel.

The British Social Scene

Having established myself at the hotel and sorted out the necessary facilities to not only enable me to continue working on my historical novel, 'Emissary To The Gods', but to have internet access and so easy contact with my children, I turned my attention to checking out the British social facilities available on that part of the coast.

First of all I looked at the social scene around Calpe and as far as Benidorm, a three quarters of an hour drive further south, by getting all the local English language newspapers and studying the 'Clubs & Associations' pages. I then chose the clubs and associations that I felt might suit me, such as Singles Clubs, Dancing Clubs, Bowling Clubs, Probus, Computer Clubs, The Lyons, The National Association Of Retired Police Officers, Writers Circles, The British Legion, The Conservative Association of which I became Secretary for a short while, also The American Naval League etc, rang their secretaries and asked if I could attend their next meeting. In every case I was immediately invited and given a warm welcome at the following event and in this way I met lots of people, made many contacts and very quickly settled into the area.

I next drove for an hour and a half up the coast to Denia, booked into a hotel and did a similar thing there. However there were less suitable clubs and associations available and I found the social scene rather cold, so I turned my back on the town.

Returning to Calpe I gave myself a rest, then drove for about two hours down the coast to Torrevieja and booked into a hotel there. What a place I found that to be! There was a very large Brit population, lots of cheap property - and a higher crime rate than in other parts of the coast! I felt as though half the population of the East End of London had moved there as most people spoke with the East End accent and it reminded me of when, at the age of sixteen, I had been a police cadet in Bethnal Green and Stoke Newington. However, the people were very friendly and there was a branch of every type of club and association available. For me, however, it was too British, had very little Spanish influence and I felt uncomfortable there. A further discomfort was the swarms of mosquitoes that came from the huge salt-water lakes on the inland side of the town. Very impressive Torrevieja certainly was, but it was too English for me to want to live there so I returned to the Spanish town of Calpe.

Glad to be back in the warmth of the Esmiralda Hotel, whilst continuing to investigate the social scene I also continued to work on my historical action novel, 'Emissary To The Gods'. Gradually I reduced the number of clubs and associations I was attending and remained mainly committed to The International Singles Club in Benidorm. This was a club with a large British contingent in its membership and I soon made good friends there, many of whom I am still friends with today.

A Catastrophe

In the meantime I was persuaded by one of the contacts I had made at the clubs to leave the Hotel and move into an apartment overlooking Calpe Fish Port. This was a luxury apartment on the seventh floor of a small apartment building, with the majority of the apartments being owned by absentee landlords from the north of Europe. In fact, I think I was the only resident in the block. The British Pound was strong against the Euro so living was cheap.

Well, I certainly remember my first night there! It was a beautiful night, warm and peaceful and I watched the sun sink behind the mountains as I sat on the terrace sipping my brandy and ginger ale while thinking how lucky I was to be in such a peaceful place. Eventually, as darkness fell, I decided to get another drink – and that was when the problems started!

Access to the terrace was through a large patio glass door and, to my horror, I found that the door had self-locked when I had pulled it too when entering the terrace. Here I was, trapped on the terrace seven stories up in an empty apartment block, with no way of obtaining help - and panic almost set in. I realised that the only way of getting back into the apartment was by breaking the glass door and that was double glazed. The terrace furniture was all made of plastic and too light to break the glass, so I was stuck. Then my Celtic gods stepped in and helped me out by concentrating my attention on an old and dilapidated wooden table that had been left in the corner of the terrace. With this table I was able to smash the glass door and escape from the trap.

It was with a great deal of embarrassment that I informed the agent of the problem and the damage the next day, but he assured me that the door was not self locking and that I had made a mistake. However, he agreed to have the door replaced on the insurance – and when this was done the lock on the door was discovered to be faulty and just waiting for someone like me to fall foul of it! Phew, was I relieved.

Move To Calpe Town Centre

A few weeks later the agent asked me to make a hurried move into another luxury apartment on the seafront in Calpe town, which I did. (I suspected that the owner of the apartment was planning to visit it and had not been informed of my occupation!) The new apartment was on the tenth floor, overlooked the bay and was very convenient for the shops and facilities of Calpe Town. By this time, however, although actively engaged in the social scene and busy with my writing, I was feeling lonely and missing the attention I had at the hotel, also the company of Carole Anne's two children.

I got over this to some extent though by making friends with two children of similar age to my grandchildren who lived at the English café just up the road from my apartment and which I frequented. The two children gave me a lot of pleasure and the

ten year old girl frequently sorted out the problems I had with my mobile phone and the difficulties I had with the Spanish language, while I and her eight year old brother looked on in wonder.

One of the things that fascinated me most about the town centre, however, was that all the roads were lined with orange trees full of oranges, with blossom appearing at the same time. It was quite acceptable when walking along the streets for anyone to just reach up and pick an orange, although few people did as oranges were so plentiful in the area. It was not a bit like England!

Exciting Year's End

Eventually my first year in Spain ended and I had my daughter Carole Anne, my son David and their four children to stay with me for Christmas and the New Year. We were a bit crowded in the apartment but managed alright as the children spent most of their time on the beach or wandering the interesting thoroughfares of Calpe. On their wanderings they usually met up with my son and daughter at a particular Spanish café in the town and experimented with the local food, their favourite being prawns in garlic.

However, on one occasion there was a bit of a problem with this arrangement. My ten year old blonde grandson Daniel had wandered off from the three girls and was apparently lost. Search parties were organised by his mother but before they could set out he turned up – on the back of a policeman's motorcycle! The policeman had found him wandering the streets lost and kindly brought him to the right café. Great relief was felt by everyone, except Daniel who thought it was a good adventure and wanted another ride on the motorcycle. (There was also some consternation amongst my three granddaughters as they all wanted a ride on the motorcycle as well!)

That same week further disaster struck, which was to enable me to test the Spanish medical facilities to the full. I unfortunately went down with viral pneumonia, became very ill and in the middle of one night had to be rushed to hospital. The ambulance took me to Benidorm Clinic, a private hospital and I was kept there for a week. The medical care was nowhere near as good as I had previously found it in the UK and, to add insult to injury, upon release I was required to pay two and a half thousand pounds for my treatment. This should have been three and a half thousand pounds but they kindly reduced the charges as I was not covered by medical insurance.

Released just in time for New Year, my family decided to have a party to celebrate and, although I was not fully recovered from the pneumonia, I thoroughly enjoyed it. My abiding memory though is standing at my window at the stroke of midnight and watching my son and daughter and their four young children all dressed in their swimming costumes and running along the beach with their towels streaming out behind them, each with a bottle of cava in their hands, then running into the sea. This proved to be very popular with other partygoers and many followed them into the waves, a good few fully clothed!

The Medical Sequel

The sequel to this medical problem was that a week later when driving my daughter and her two children to Alicante Airport I suddenly became ill again and couldn't breathe. We managed to reach the airport and upon arrival I knew that I needed medical assistance.

Whilst my daughter dealt with the formalities for herself and her family to return to England I staggered into the Departure Lounge, found two policemen and placed myself in their hands. It must have been a bit of a shock for the two policemen, though, to have this man who was much taller and bigger than them suddenly fall upon them breathlessly demanding help and obviously very distressed. They rose to the occasion however, procured a wheelchair and sent me in an ambulance to Alicante Hospital.

But arrangement at Alicante Hospital didn't go right as they were overflowing with casualties from a viral pneumonia epidemic that was sweeping the coast, so they sent me to Vila Joiosa Hospital. There I spent a week in intensive care and my emergency medical treatment on the national health was second to none. I was one of the lucky ones though, as many people of my age didn't survive the illness. Since then I have been a patient in that hospital twice, also visited it regularly for scans and to see specialists and I have always found the medical attention excellent.

MOVE TO ALTEA

Overlooking The Port

Whilst I was in hospital I realised that I could no longer cope with the very steep hill in Calpe and, with great kindness, a friend found me a first floor apartment on the flat area overlooking Altea Port. With a great deal of regret I therefore left Calpe behind and settled into a large Spanish apartment at Altea Port, about seven miles north of Benidorm.

It was very well furnished, beautifully positioned and I held many parties there. I was also never short of family visitors from the UK. The apartment had a large terrace overlooking the port and one of my regular pleasures was to sit on the terrace and watch the fleets of various sized fishing boats enter or leave the port.

It was during this time that I took out 'Residencia' in Spain, which meant that I became a resident and was registered on the books of the local authority, also that I became entitled to full and free medical treatment other than just emergency treatment, together with the services of my local National Health Service GP. This had no bearing on my remaining a British citizen, though and I still retained my British passport.

Then, two years down the line from leaving Calpe I suddenly realised that I was making no profit from renting out my bungalow in England, while at the same time I was paying a high rent for the apartment in Calpe. With regards to my bungalow, what the renting agent didn't take from me the tax man did. As I was now officially a Resident in Spain and had no intention of returning to live in the UK, I therefore sold my property in England and used the money to buy an apartment in Spain.

MY OWN BRICKS & MORTAR

Searching For The Ideal Apartment

The Spanish town of Albir lies next to Altea and about two miles further down the coast towards Benidorm. Its three main shopping centres are all more or less on the flat and its climate is similar to the warm micro-climate of Benidorm Bay. It has a beautiful seafront and promenade lined with bistros and bars, is surrounded by orange orchards and backed by very high mountains.

Although very Spanish in character, the population includes a large number of Dutch residents, followed by many Norwegians and then many Brits. Its roads are lined with cafes and bistros, the terraces of which are normally full of people having their coffee and croissants or brandy during daylight, but the town is very quiet after dark. For night life it is necessary to go to the large bustling town of Benidorm just five miles away. Considered to be one of the best places on the coast to live, I fell in love with the town and decided to buy an apartment there.

After a very thorough examination of the property market, I found the apartment block that suited me most was 'The Point' in Beethoven Avenue. This four stories high block of thirty-six luxury apartments lies in a very quiet part of town just five minutes walk from the beach and has its own spectacular swimming pool set in a lovely garden.

Obtaining an apartment in the block was not easy though, as they tended to be bought as soon as they came on the market. However, after looking around for a few months and finding nothing else that I wanted, I struck lucky as my agent found me a two bedroom top floor apartment in the block and I snapped it up before anyone else bought it.

With all the usual facilities, including two bathrooms set in black marble, with one containing a Jacuzzi bath and having stained glass windows, the terrace of the apartment looks out over the palm tree lined gardens and artistically shaped swimming pool, then across the eucalyptus park and the town to the Ice Mountain. Built just over twenty years ago, the apartments are of superior quality and very quiet. The only noise I hear is when the dustmen empty the bins in the middle of the night, particularly if they have been on the wine.

Buying The Apartment

The mechanics of buying the apartment were much simpler than I expected and everything went without a hitch. I first of all approached my Spanish bank for advice and they were most helpful. As well as arranging the movement of cash etc they introduced me to a local historia, whose office then dealt with everything.

A historia is a mixture of being a lawyer, an accountant and adviser on all things Spanish and, after I had agreed a price for the apartment, he dealt with everything. He negotiated the terms of the sale etc, including how much should be paid in cash and how much by cheque, which is very important in Spain for tax purposes, ensured that everything was legal and above board, then attended the notary with me to legalise the deal.

Since then the historia has dealt with all my income tax problems, my registration as a resident, my application for a Spanish driving licence, the purchase of my car and all the other official things I have had to be involved with, including just giving me advice or interpreting any official mail from the Spanish authorities. I have found his service invaluable in unlocking the mysteries of Spanish officialdom.

VALUE OF THE CLUBS

The Social Dimension

The use of clubs to mix socially with other people is valuable for pensioners in the UK, but it is doubly valuable when living alone in a foreign country. One can feel very lonely and vulnerable with no relatives nearby and only an infrequent meeting with family. Being a member of a club enables one to meet other people in a similar position and with similar worries, with club members gradually taking the place of family.

There are innumerable clubs operating on the Costa Blanca and I sampled many of them from time to time, eventually settling for membership of two. First there was the Benidorm International Singles Club of which I am a past president and to which most of my close friends belong. As the name implies this is a club for single people and has over a hundred members but, like me, many members get together as couples and are allowed to stay in the club. With the club offering so many facilities, including dinners, dances, ten pin bowling, petanca or bowls on sand, as well as walking in the mountains, there is no excuse for any single person to be lonely. I look upon this club as my home club and its existence still plays a large part in my social life.

The second club to which I now belong is 'The Companions Club Of Albir'. Formed only two years ago this is a normal social club with over five hundred members, very British and very active in every aspect of the social scene. Myself and my companion pick and choose between both clubs for those events or excursions we wish to take part in and we both actively assist the two clubs in the running of their events.

In addition to the clubs there are innumerable excellent bars, bistros and restaurants catering for all tastes and budgets in the area, with the fish restaurants at Calpe Port being exceptionally good.

Divorced & Desperate

As I said before, I sampled many clubs and one of particular interest was 'The Divorced & Desperate Club' of Calpe. This club was better known as 'The Divorced & Dangerous Club' and was run by a journalist on the local newspaper that I knew through my writing, who got me to go along to a meeting on a false pretence.

She invited me to a special dinner that she was holding at a local restaurant for writers, artists and other intellectuals so, thinking I would meet like minded people to myself, I went along. However, it was nothing like it was purported to be but was just a gathering of middle aged single people, most of whom were desperate to find a partner of the opposite sex and it certainly had some characters in its ranks.

There were about forty people present on four tables and apart from the journalist I didn't meet any intellectuals, artists or other writers. The members were of all shapes and sizes and their main interests seemed to be the beverages that were being served and the need to find a partner, to which end after each course of the dinner we all changed tables and sat with different people. It was different to any other club I had been to and might I say rather amusing, but it didn't suit my puritan taste so I declined further invitations.

AN OVERVIEW

Australia V Spain

Looking back now I ask myself if I did the right thing by choosing to live in Spain, rather than remaining in England or going to Australia. On the positive side the winter climate in the Benidorm Bay area must be the mildest in Spain, with many winter days being as warm as a normal English summer day. Against that, the summer temperatures in both countries are very high and difficult to deal with, with Australia having the highest temperatures. However, escape from these high temperatures is quite easy from Spain, with a trip to the cooler summer weather of the UK.

In addition, although English is the first language to be spoken in Australia and the second language in Spain, here on the Costa Blanca it is commonly spoken.

Every service and everything I can buy in England I can get here in Albir, including English newspapers, English church services, English TV, films in English at the local cinema and, of course, full internet access.

The only drawbacks that I find is my inability to speak Spanish, with this being noticeable when dealing with authority or local officials such as the police, the NHS doctors or the NHS hospitals. However, there are plenty of interpreters available at reasonable prices.

Did I Do The Right Thing?

So did I do the right thing by coming to live in Spain, rather than staying in England or moving to Australia? Looking back now I'm sure I did. My winter bouts of bronchitis made staying in England for the winter a non-starter and that left the choice for the most suitable place to be either Spain or Australia. Both countries have many things in common, not least a warmer winter climate.

However, the disadvantage with Australia is that it is over twenty-six hours flight time away from the UK and my children - whilst Spain has the advantage of being just over two!

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