

The cortijo is very traditional, with Moorish touches to spice things up

"I wanted a place in the countryside"

The idea of buying a holiday home in the sun six years ago led Andrew Forbes to living and working in Andalucía full time, and he's never been happier!

WORDS JUDY DARLEY

Stress in his working life in Buckinghamshire inspired Andrew Forbes to seek a holiday home in Spain. "As a partner in my own busy marketing communications firm in Buckinghamshire, the thought of somewhere peaceful and sunny to escape to became increasingly compelling," he says. "All I wanted was a place in the Andalusian countryside; close enough to an airport to make long weekends feasible, yet far enough from the busy coast."

Today, however, Andrew lives in the heart of the Costa del Sol, a place he never imagined would appeal to him. "I divide my time between a busy expat professional and social life on the coast and weekends in the Andalusian countryside, eating *tapas* and practising my Spanish."

Moving on

Before relocating to Spain, Andrew lived a very different life in a different sort of dream home, a converted barn in Buckinghamshire. "I spent most of my time working to pay the mortgage! I love Britain and it will always be my home in my heart, but it is an extraordinarily expensive place to live – especially in the south-east. Much of my earnings were spent on a huge mortgage and car payments," he says. "I became increasingly burnt out in Britain, and life seemed to slip by. I sold the marketing communications company and for the first time since I left university 15 years ago, I was truly free. At first it was scary, but I realised that this was the time to move to Spain. It was fantastic to have such a clear and compelling feeling. It really made the move easier, as I had no doubts that this was the right thing to do. I left behind my stressful work in Britain and took the leap of faith to move to Andalucía two and half years ago."

Andrew's love of Spain, and particularly Andalucía, began with a trip to Granada in the 1990s. "Cities

like Granada have a rich Moorish history and it was a great introduction to Andalucía. Seville is another amazing destination; it's truly buzzing into the small hours of each morning. I always avoided the coast and the Costa del Sol as I just thought about the clichés of high-rise hotels and sunburnt Brits wearing socks with their sandals," he says. "However, about seven

"I divide my time between a busy life on the coast and weekends in the countryside"

years ago I came to stay near Estepona with friends and realised how great the coast is too. It's nothing like Seville or Granada, but it has many high-quality restaurants and bars and hotels – more cosmopolitan and sophisticated than I originally thought."

Andrew wanted to live in the countryside, yet within easy reach of Málaga airport. "The inland area



BELOW: Andrew outside his country home, the cortijo





Along the Costa del Sol are exotic plants from all around the world

Garden leave

■ "The apartment has sub-tropical gardens that are stunning but not very authentic for the area – they are full of banana palms from the Canary Islands and palm trees from North Africa. As with many complexes on the coast, I just have to pay a monthly community fee and the gardens are taken care of for me. Perfect for a 'lock-up-and-leave' holiday home."

"Cortijo de las Nieves doesn't have a garden. I designed it so the terraces of the property run directly into the countryside, and all the wild flowers and trees have been maintained. There are lots of wild herbs, like sage, anise and rosemary as well as wild lavender, iris, orchids, sweet peas, aloe and lots of grasses, plus cork oaks, olive, almond, citrus and fig trees."



This is Andrew's latest purchase, a new townhouse in La Mairena



Spanish builders – every British expat has a tale to tell about them!

north of Marbella has easy access to the coast and airport as well as beautiful national parks," he says, "but what was available was either very unattractive or completely out of my budget of €250,000."

Buying on both

In 2001, Andrew began searching for a suitable property via a large real estate firm based on the Costa del Sol and found Cortijo de las Nieves within a few months. In retrospect, he feels that the agency wasn't the best option for him.

"Although I'm now really happy with Cortijo de las Nieves, it was an extremely complicated purchasing process and once I'd paid the deposit the real estate agent didn't want to know about any problems!"

The cottage was once little more than a rustic *refugio* for the workers on the land, but now has *en suite* bathrooms, a large lounge and dining room, terraces and a private pool.

"The apartment couldn't be more different from the cortijo – it's in a luxury beach resort"

"The house is only 35 minutes from the coast, but if you want to live here you need to speak Spanish – and rightly so. The village has a few smoky bars filled with chatty and friendly locals where you can choose from a range of *tapas*, from little brochettes of prawns to deep-fried fish to home-made meatballs, plus plenty of goats' cheese and cured ham. No wonder I'm still big-boned, despite going to the gym."

The struggle to renovate the *cortijo* took so long that Andrew, impatient for a tranquil place to escape to, bought an apartment at the Torre Bermeja resort, near Estepona.

"It has proved to be a popular holiday rental property. The apartment couldn't be more different from the *cortijo*. It's in a frontline luxury beach resort with very little to remind you that you are in Spain,

apart from the weather. Everything is maintained to flawless perfection and you can easily survive without ever learning a word of Spanish."

More amor

Another key Spanish attraction for Andrew is his partner, Rafael. "Rafael is a real estate lawyer, and I met him when I went to his firm to seek help with some paperwork. I couldn't have had a smarter or better-looking person to help me! Ironically, he was pretty tired of helping pushy, demanding foreign investors, so I really don't think he had any plans to end up in a long-term relationship with a Brit."

Despite owning two very different properties in Andalucía, Andrew doesn't live in either full time. Instead, the couple live in Rafael's apartment in Marbella and have recently bought an off-plan townhouse together.

The location of Andrew's latest property is one of its big draws. "The townhouse is being built in La Mairena, an area of Mediterranean cork oak forest north-east of Marbella with views across the coast, the Sierra Nevada mountains and Málaga city. It should be ready by the end of the summer and then I'll be able to combine my need to live on the coast, ○

Property prowess

■ "The apartment on the Torre Bermeja complex was never really intended to be a long-term home or private retreat. As a rental investment I made sure the look was modern, clean and fashionable. I used a local interior designer to bring the unit to life with striking contemporary art and pieces of furniture that complemented the marble interior."

"Cortijo de las Nieves is much more of private retreat for friends and family. I really wanted the interior to reflect my fascination with Andalucía's Moorish past. I also wanted to furnish it myself."

Bonding with the builders

■ Andrew learnt that to get things done closer to budget and to agreed time scales, he needed to learn a little Spanish so he could chat with the builder. Even so, it took over two years to complete renovations that were supposed to take six months. "Shouting or showing frustration is an absolute cultural no-no here. That just makes everything stop. If things go wrong, you have to swallow your pride and go share a beer and *topa* with the builder in a local bar. Once,

when things were going desperately slowly, I asked a bilingual Spanish friend to come up with me to meet the builder. My Andalusian friend knew exactly how to handle the situation. After an initially frosty meeting in the builder's office, we went for a boozy lunch where stories and jokes were shared. I was no longer seen as the pushy foreigner, but a normal guy who just wanted to try and make things work out. Within a month the project was finished and the *cortijo* was finally ready."



The low-rise apartment is within a luxury resort, Torre Bermeja



The apartment is sleek and modern in the best Costa del Sol fashion



When the *corbijo*'s well ran dry in the summer, water was shipped in

ADVICE ANDREW'S TIPS

- Make sure you buy a home with services connected as it's very hard to get new services connected to a rural property.
- Make sure your real estate agent can speak Spanish as well as English.
- Choose a lawyer that is independent and avoid recommendations from the real estate agent.

close to clients, commerce and friends, with my love of the natural environment."

Andrew has been welcomed into Rafael's family. "They're an immensely loving family. Regularly we share a Sunday lunch of *paella* with them in their Ronda home or in their charming country house deep in the chestnut forests of Cartajima," Andrew says. "So I really seem to lead two lives now. One day

"For Andalusians, priorities are all about time with the family, tasty food and good wine"

I can be at my desk on the coast, doing business in English, and the next day I can be inland in a smoky bar, enjoying a good *rioja*, eating too many *tapas* and trying to hold a conversation in Spanish."

Learning to relax

Like many expats, initially Andrew found the Spanish concept of time – which could charitably be described



Torre Bermeja is in the sought-after location of the West Golden Mile

as 'laid back' – challenging. "In Andalusia, if you arrive within 40 minutes of the agreed appointment that's fine! The *mañana* concept translates into everything. As a foreigner who can't speak Spanish, builders and contractors know that you can't really control situations, and, as you're often in Britain, away from the renovation or building work, you can't see when the team are working or when they are on another site!"

These issues motivated Andrew to set up his own property and lifestyle consultancy, Luxury Andalusia. He's keen to stress that he's providing a service to buyers. "Now that I live here, I have the experience,

contacts and language skills to genuinely help other Brits find their dream home in Spain. Clients ask me to do a detailed search and find a range of properties that fit their desired brief, whether that's a golf villa or a rustic farmhouse. Since I'm not selling the houses the clients are never under pressure to buy but get a real insight into the best options."

Andrew particularly appreciates how much less stressful his life is in Spain. "Sometimes, at work, I need a little stress and drama to get things going, but in Spain I'm obliged to take life a little slower. The Spaniards know that life is for living – for Andalusians, priorities are all about time with the



The *corbijo*'s terraces lead straight into the untouched countryside

Beautiful bargains

"The beauty of living close to the Spanish coast is that you can take a fast catamaran from Tarifa to Tangiers and be in Africa in 35 minutes. My first shopping trip was eventful to say the least. A friend recommended a shop for me in Tangiers. The owner was to meet me at the port, so I just had to get across. However I stupidly took a rental car across on the ferry and realised once I arrived that I could not find the green card, so I almost had the car impounded! At one point the car was taken to a large warehouse and the key thrown in a box full of other car keys. All around me were cars covered in a thick layer of dust – they must have been there for months. I was quite nervous! Morocco is modernising at an

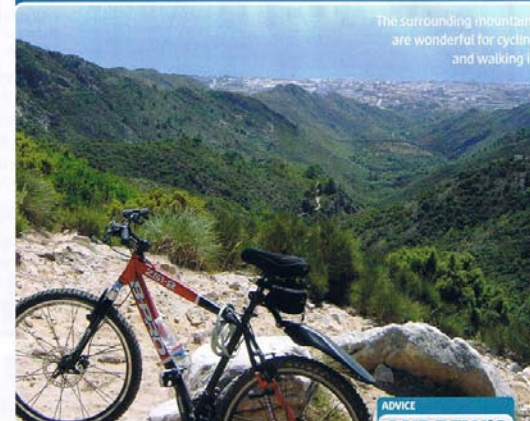
amazing rate, but it is still very different from Europe. The customs system seems to be based on bribes, and a few bribes did manage to get the authorities to reach a compromise. I would leave the car in the port car park and return with all my shopping and drive it back on the boat. I just couldn't drive it into town. It took 90 minutes to reach this agreement and plenty of euros, but I was very happy! The rest of the day was spent with more negotiating – this time on the purchase of intricately carved lanterns, ceramics, fabrics and furniture. It took three people to help me get everything back to the port, but I managed to get a huge amount of authentic furnishing for a fraction of the cost in Spain."

Location, location

■ Part of the appeal of Cortijo de las Nieves is its views of the Sierra de las Nieves mountains to the west and the snowy Sierra Nevada to the east.

"It's a magical place of peaceful, dramatic mountains, pine forests and sleepy villages. There are only a few farms and rural homes in this area. At night there's no light pollution. You can see

amazing starry nights throughout most of the year. Guests who've stayed at the house have commented that this is one of the most amazing things – just to lie on the terrace at night and look at the enormity of space above." Andrew says, "In daytime, eagles and griffon vultures are a frequent sight, as are swallows, foxes, rabbits, lizards and snakes."



The surrounding mountains are wonderful for cycling and walking in

ADVICE ANDREW'S TIPS

- The Spanish in general and Andalusians in particular are a very warm and friendly people, but to be truly welcomed here you need to make an effort with the language.
- When buying, take your time and make sure you're well informed.

family, tasty food, good wine and time on the beach or in the countryside. That's not a bad culture to integrate with. The combination of the warmer climate, hot summers and longer days has been a major catalyst to simplify life. Living with a Spaniard has made me live to the Andalusian rhythm and it suits me really well."

■ You can find out more about Andrew's service at www.luxuryandalucia.com



The immaculately re-stored country house is as Spanish as you can get