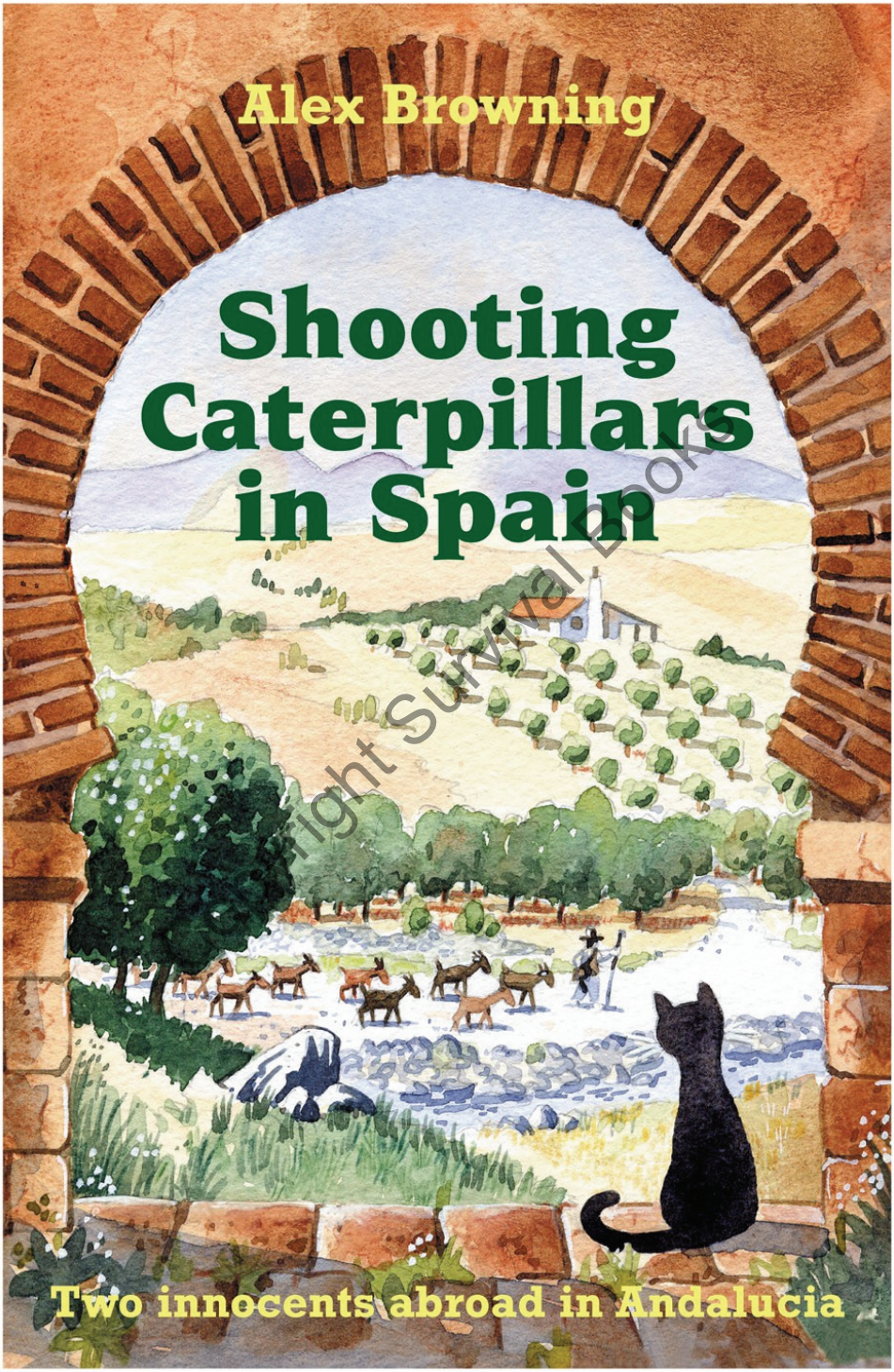

Shooting Caterpillars in Spain

by

Alex Browning

SURVIVAL BOOKS • LONDON • ENGLAND

First published 2005
Reprinted 2006

Survival Books Limited
26 York Street, London W1U 6PZ, United Kingdom
(☎ +44 (0)20-7788 7644, 🖷 +44 (0)870-762 3212
✉ info@survivalbooks.net
💻 www.survivalbooks.net

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
A CIP record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-907339-08-0

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to Joe and Kerry Laredo and Graeme and Louise Chesters who planted an idea, and especially to Graeme who pruned it, Jim Watson who brought all his skills to bear on the cover and illustrations, and Di Tolland for her enthusiasm and hard work.

My special thanks go to Peter Read who has been a rock throughout, and without whom the idea could never have become reality.

Alex Browning

OTHER TITLES BY SURVIVAL BOOKS

The Best Places To Buy A Home
France; Spain

Buying a Home
Australia & New Zealand; Bulgaria, Cyprus; France; Greece; Italy; Portugal; South Africa; Spain; Buying, Selling & Letting Property (UK)

Buying and Renting a Home
London; New York

Foreigners Abroad: Triumphs & Disasters
France; Spain

Living and Working
America; Australia; Britain Canada; France; Germany The Gulf States & Saudi Arabia; Ireland; Italy; London; New Zealand; Spain; Switzerland

Earning Money from Your Home
France; Spain

Making a Living
France; Spain

Retiring Abroad
France; Spain

Other Titles
Investing in Property Abroad; Renovating & Maintaining Your French Home; Running Gîtes and B&Bs in France; Rural Living in France; Shooting Caterpillars in Spain; Wild Thyme in Ibiza

THE AUTHOR

As a child Alex Browning was dragged around from pillar to post by her gypsy parents, who sailed round the world for their honeymoon and never quite got the hang of farming on dry land. She went to a Catholic boarding school in Wales and spent many years arguing with the headmistress about her lack of faith and homework. She was expelled, several times, usually for smoking – but on one occasion for bringing her pregnant horse to school and cutting lessons to attend the birth.

She has the attention span of a fruit fly and consequently had many jobs, which have included nightclub hostess, interior decorator, working on a provincial newspaper, furniture factory machine-minder, auxiliary nurse and reader for a publisher.

In her turn she dragged her long-suffering husband around Somerset restoring properties, before hauling him (and their two cats) off to Spain. They had little money and very fuzzy ideas on how to make a living: *Shooting Caterpillars in Spain* is the warts-and-all account of their life in Spain.

Pet lovers can rest assured that the author doesn't condone the massacre of Spain's wildlife – the caterpillars in question transmit a poison that can prove fatal to cats and dogs.

Contents

With fondest love and heartfelt thanks to

Chris, Hope and Peter.

Without you this story could not have been told.

INTRODUCTION

Alex Browning and her husband James were becoming bored with their comfortable but staid life in Somerset and needed a new challenge. Buying a Volvo was proof that terminal middle-age wasn't far away, so in a moment of temporary insanity they (and their cats) chucked it all in for a new life in a leaky, snake-infested farmhouse in southern Spain.

Alex and James are practical people who can turn their hands to (almost) anything, but their new life turned out to be a constant, almost vertical, learning experience. With virtually no spare funds, the enormity of what they had taken on was daunting, and almost every tentative step forward was followed by two steps backwards. However, with the help of friendly but eccentric neighbours and expat friends, who ranged from the odd to the disturbed and downright criminal, they somehow managed to stay afloat.

Their attempts to start a farmhouse holiday business – a world away from the beaches, burger bars, discos and souvenir shops that many holidaymakers yearn for – weren't helped by having no telephone, weather which ranged from ferociously hot to terrifyingly stormy, Kafkaesque bureaucracy, pernicious lawyers, a house full of mentally unstable cats and alarming wildlife, constantly expiring cars, medical emergencies and personal tragedies, not to mention a looming recession that would have serious repercussions for Spain's tourist industry.

How Alex and James survived is a heart-warming tale of triumph and disaster that will keep you engrossed, and their amusing (and occasionally heart-rending) experiences – and the escapades of their pets – will have in tears of laughter.

1.
Throwing Your Heart Over

It all started the day Pogo stole the little girl's cake. That was the day the rot set in, the canker of dissatisfaction that can spoil your life, or lead to a very different life that stretches your mental and physical sinews; a life that brings you close to the edge of hunger and danger, a life that gives you that 'Wow, Life is Wonderful!' feeling.

Pogo, the trigger to all this existential navel gazing, was a large, greedy bay horse who played an important part in our lives, as my husband James and I both enjoyed riding and competing in horse trials. This particular morning, when Pogo became a perpetrator and I saw the light, started normally enough as we clattered out of the stable yard into the main street of Bower Hinton, a Somerset village that had been pleasantly sleepy and rural for the previous thousand years or so. Geese foraged on the green in front of Mouse Cottage, our lovingly restored hamstone house, and the horses grazed in a rented cider apple orchard beside the house.

'Morning Phil – your damn geese chased me down the garden again and I had to hide behind Pogo,' I called out to our neighbour, who laughed unfeelingly.

'Ay, thiccy birds can be a bit fierce, especially that ol' gander, gotta keep a broom handy for 'ee… you be wanting some duck eggs today my lover?'

Phil and his wife were good neighbours: typical Somerset farmers, they were a generous, good-natured family always ready with a joke or advice.

The sun was hot on my back as I pulled Pogo up at the red traffic light in the narrow village high street and my attention wandered to the perfectly tended gardens and hanging baskets of a village engaged in the 'Somerset in Bloom' competition. Sensing the slack hand on the reins, Pogo struck without warning, thrusting his snout through the open window of the car alongside, snatching a cream and jam doughnut from the hand of the little girl sitting in the back seat. The child howled with terror as Pogo munched her cake, his head bobbing up and down

with relish. Suddenly he sneezed, spattering the car with gobs of cream, jam and green phlegm. Unfortunately, the passenger window was also open this hot morning, and the girl's mother caught most of it across her carefully made-up face and immaculate white blouse.

This was too much and father leaped out of the car shouting and waving his fist at Pogo who, being a nervous horse despite his large size, recoiled and defecated copiously.

Mother also got out of the car to give me a piece of her mind, stepping straight into the steaming pile of horse poo in her strappy high heels.

'F****** horses,' she screeched, 'shouldn't be allowed in the f****** countryside, doing their f****** turds in public, it's f****** disgusting, something should be f****** done about it.' She paused to catch her breath and shake some poo off her foot.

'Look, I'm really sorry,' I said, 'he doesn't usually do this sort of thing, let me get your daughter another cake. Here, maybe a tissue will help…'

'As for you, you snooty f****** bitch,' she snarled, 'sitting up there like the f****** queen on that bloody horse…'

The lights had turned to green for the second time and drivers further back in the queue who couldn't see what was going on were now hooting. Father, who looked like he might have hypertension, waved his fist at them as well as Pogo, who was backing away from his tormentors.

A gentleman in a pork-pie hat pushing his wheelchair-bound wife on the pavement was now threatened by the huge incontinent bottom. Being true country people they weren't nervous of the horse, but didn't care for bad language.

'Oooh, it's a real shame how some people carry on over nothing and such language in front of the kiddy!' remarked the wheelchair lady with pursed lips.

'Right, love, frightening t'orse like that.' Pork-pie laid the callused calming hand of a man well used to horses on Pogo's

sweaty neck. 'Should know better.'

'Don't you criticise my wife, you old fart!' howled father, turning on pork-pie.

This, I realised, was how wars started. It was quite easy to see how a small incident like a stolen cake could have terrible consequences. In the interests of civic calm, I dismounted and tied Pogo to the railings, before grovelling all round and giving the family, whose day I had apparently ruined, five pounds to buy another cake.

By the time I got back to Pogo he had alleviated *his* emotional distress by leaning over the railings and eating most of Mr Trecockle's prize blooms. I looked in horror at the couple of marguerites still revolving in his sugar and jam frosted lips, but worse was to come as dear old Mrs Trecockle limped out and looked at the carnage.

'Don't yew worry, my dear,' she piped, her liver-spotted lips trembling. 'Accidents will happen. Fred 'as got some more flowers out back in case o'summat ruinin 'is display – powerful keen 'e is on t' 'Somerset in Bloom' contest.'

I trotted home in a subdued mood. The country didn't feel like the country any more with the influx of grockles (Somerset slang for tourists or strangers) to our little village. What had once been cow-parsley and cowpat-splattered country lanes with the occasional unhurried car, or a farmer herding cows on a bicycle, had become racetracks for frenzied Londoners in Chelsea tractors searching for twee weekend cottages. These busy people didn't like to be kept waiting, so riding, bicycling or walking the dog were fast becoming extreme sports for us slow-moving peasants.

Most city-dwellers, and especially Londoners, seemed to think that living in a rose-smothered country cottage would transform their lives; that all the wrinkles would be smoothed out once they were on the rural Highway to Happiness. Our personal highway to happiness had petered out, both literally and figuratively, on a roundabout in a new housing estate.

Developers had bought our rented apple orchard and were planning a further estate of executive homes to match the one along the lane. All over Somerset the rows of gnarled cider-apple trees were being felled to make way for rows of identical jerry-built boxes, and our way of life was disappearing as fast as the apple blossom.

Mouse Cottage was nearly completed after three years of backbreaking work and it felt like time for a new challenge. James and I started playing the 'what if' game. What if we could sell the cottage for a good profit and start our own business? What if we moved abroad? It was an exciting scenario, only spoilt by one hard fact; we had little capital between us and no prospects of getting any more except by hard work. On the plus side, James was a highly skilled engineer and had hands-on building experience, while I could also hold up my end of an RSJ, decorate, cook and garden.

It's impossible to say how we make decisions, on what hidden level the dialogue takes place, but we all know when a decision has been made. Reason doesn't necessarily have much to do with it, nor does the opinion of one's elders, betters or family. Suddenly you reach a crossroads where you have to make a momentous decision; it can be scary; it probably *should* be scary. With hindsight you can see those nodes and wonder what would have been the outcome if you had taken a totally different course of action, but of course you can never go back. Once past the 'shall we, shan't we' point you must have courage and pursue your dream.

Horse riders coming up to a big and frightening fence have a choice: stop and turn away or go for it. If you go for it with conviction, if you 'throw your heart over' as the Irish say, your body and horse will follow (not necessarily in the correct order of course).

On these shaky grounds we decided to throw our hearts over the fence. It was time for a new road in some warm, convivial European country. We left our jobs, threw a monumental going-

away party, sold all the junk with a garage sale and set out for Spain in a Tonka truck (a tiny Toyota Hi-Ace) with just the bare necessities of life and two seriously unhappy cats wailing for their Mouse Cottage. We felt like wailing with them as we drove through the drizzle to the ferry. Already I missed my lovely, brave horse who'd fought his way back from a crippling back problem to give us endless fun in competition and endurance rides. I'd taught James to ride on him and seen him go from total novice to intermediate trials rider in less than two years, despite some crashing falls. The only consolation was the old horse had gone back to his previous owners in Rutland who were prepared to give him a luxurious retirement home.

As I had friends in southern Spain and had spent many happy holidays there, the Costa del Sol was the obvious choice. A house-hunting visit before totally burning our boats narrowed the area down to Alhaurin el Grande (Alhaurin means 'The Garden of Allah' in Arabic), a small town in the hills west of Malaga. Property here was cheaper than on the coast, it was an attractively verdant area, as the Moors had discovered, and it seemed ideal for the business we were planning: farmhouse holidays for those who preferred the quieter pace of life with opportunities for bird-watching, painting, riding, walking, or simply lying inert beside a pool.

For the exploratory visit to Alhaurin el Grande, I had asked my Spanish-speaking friend Paddy to come with me for moral support and as translator when my Beginner's Class Spanish failed me. The narrow potholed road from Mijas, with its total lack of guard-rails on switchback curves and free-fall drops, made Paddy extremely nervous. At first this made me laugh, but I wasn't laughing so much after glimpsing the third or fourth wrecked car several hundred feet below.

Feeling better after a jolt of coffee and a pacharan, we went to meet Diego, an estate agent I'd contacted from England. He'd advertised that he spoke English, but half an hour later I wasn't

so sure. His English was machine-gun fast and loud, with more hand-ballet than a Thai dancer, but the words, though definitely English didn't make much sense. However, Paddy assured me his Spanish asides were intelligible and he was certain he could find a suitable property for us.

The rest of the day was an eye-opening, butt-clenching tour of hopeless properties. Some had fantastic views, perched on mountainsides that would make a goat nervous, while others were one-bedroom, concrete shackettes built for weekending Malagueños to tend their citrus trees, which had views of – well – citrus trees. Villas suitable for a holiday business with a pool and four to six bedrooms were far too expensive, totally out of our reach. The available *fincas* (farm or smallholding, typically under ten hectares) on Diego's books, although they had land – in some cases whole mountainsides – tended also to have rising damp, falling damp and the sort of plumbing that would have been familiar to our great-grandparents.

It puzzled me why there was usually a rampart of prickly-pear cactus surrounding farmhouses, until Diego explained the finer botanical points of *opuntia*: not only does the plant act as an impenetrable fence against animals and unwelcome visitors, it also rapidly processes and deodorises bodily waste, and you can also eat the fruits of your labour, so to speak. The only downside to this biological miracle is the fine irritant hairs covering the fruit – should you inadvertently impale yourself, you will spend many hours of embarrassment and agony having the near invisible spines removed.

Diego drove with great verve and machismo, giving us a running commentary as he slewed around bends over sheer drops, bumped over boulders in dry riverbeds and hurtled down mule tracks. This was bad enough, but he liked to make his conversational points with eye contact, especially with Paddy, who was huddled in the back wearing impenetrable black shades and making little whimpering noises.

The first day we didn't see anything even remotely suitable,

which made us feel even more stressed. One 'delightful rustic property' was an ex-chicken farm on a featureless plain, dotted with dead and dying fruit trees. The house was so full of rubbish we had to sidle through the rooms sideways, while trying to keep our hands and clothes away from the dusty grease that coated every surface. It seemed the source was the kitchen, a stygian cave where the walls, ceiling, floor and cabinets had a strange texture, almost rubbery, with a stove that looked more like a gigantic melting black candle than an appliance. A sweetish-burnt smell, like an essence of bird fried in rancid oil, still lingered on the stuffy air. The poor chickens had obviously all ended their miserable lives being sacrificed on this altar to the fry-up before the owners had retreated back to England penniless. Even Diego's enthusiasm was slightly muted as he assured us that the house was being sold fully furnished, 'as you seed it'.

Diego avoided mentioning the problem but I found out later about the dead trees, as did the many foreigners who bought cheap properties in the area around Cartama, only to discover that the water supply was both unreliable and saline. Heavy abstraction from the aquifers drew in salt water from the sea several miles distant, corroding pipes, killing plants and making a nice British cuppa taste vile.

Before seeing the next property, we stopped to have lunch at a bar in Torre Alqueria. Diego ordered a selection of *tapas* and a jug of *sangria* to keep us going, which was most welcome. He asked if there was anything I didn't like. This was quite easy really as I like everything, bar tripe and strong salami-type sausages. Paddy wolfed down a little dish of a brown stew called *callos*, smacking her lips enthusiastically. I tasted a morsel, which was delicious, so Diego ordered another *racion* which we quickly polished off. When I asked what it was, she winked at Diego before telling me it was just a stew made with chickpeas in a savoury gravy. They looked at each other and tittered.

'What's so funny?' I asked suspiciously.

She giggled. ' C*allos* is tripe.'

I wondered whether to feel queasy, but it seemed easier just to accept that I actually liked tripe Spanish-style, and the *sangria* helped. Refortified, we got into Diego's car and headed out of the village, which was comparatively new and laid out on a grid system, with groups of houses facing onto a shared gated courtyard. It felt more Moroccan than Spanish, with the windowless backs of the houses turning blank walls to the street. There was a strangely secretive sullen atmosphere, which made Paddy and I a bit uncomfortable, but Diego dismissed our twittering and told us it was one of 'Franco's villages', built on the dictator's orders as social housing during the '50s. Soon we had left the houses and were weaving across a grid of pockmarked roads, with the remains of lamp-posts, wrecked electricity boxes, gaping manholes, and goats and dogs nibbling lethargically at heaps of rubbish – it looked more like a war zone than a village.

After a few minutes drive, the houses vanished and we were on a winding grass track which segued into a dry riverbed, shouldered with rock formations. Sometimes the track was beside the river, sometimes it wandered into the river and out the other side, but always it angled upwards. And upwards. Now there were quite respectable mountains on either side and Paddy was having a *crise de nervios* each time we hit a rut or large stone and slid sickeningly across the track. Old farmhouses spilled down the slopes, each with its beehive-topped wellhead and midden, while the boundaries snaked across ravines and up nearly vertical scree, delineated by whitewashed boulders and the odd tree. Although they obviously had water, they didn't appear to have anything else: there were no fields, no crops, no visible animals.

Diego told us that water, strangely enough, wasn't a problem in the bone-dry mountains: you just employed a water-diviner to find a spring, the *pozo* man came with his drilling equipment and shortly you would have a stream of cool, crystal-clear

water. He couldn't, however, tell us how they built the wells before modern drill rigs were used, or indeed what the farmers produced in this barren land.

'Chickens, goats, ribbits might be?' He shrugged. It was all a bit academic, as most of the farms seemed to be deserted. We bumped and slewed around a final corner and were almost at the top of the mountain before Diego stopped before a fancy wrought-iron gate leading to a grass-carpeted gravel drive and a neat two-bedroom villa. Looking back down the mountain, there was an eagle's eye view of Malaga and the coast, and we gawped at the million-dollar view, breathing air so pure and knife-keen one could feel the breath sliding in and out of lungs and sinuses.

The house was a disappointment: not only was it tiny, it was so low-ceilinged James would have had to shuffle around with his knees bent, and there wasn't enough room to extend. There were 182 steps leading down to the well, so deep a dropped stone returned only the faintest of plops after an interminable wait . Some vines were grimly hanging on to a non-productive life and the pigsties gave the clue to what else the previous owners had done for a living. It was a lovely little doll's house on the roof of the world and I would have liked to buy it as a retreat, a place to write, paint and think. But to judge by Paddy's reaction, it might not get the thumbs-up from our putative paying guests, to say nothing of their car hire companies. Come to that, I wasn't sure I wanted to yomp the groceries up 1,000 vertical feet if the car broke down, so we crossed it off the list.

'I heave tree houses for youse today,' Diego semaphored as he greeted us enthusiastically with a volley of kisses. He set off towards Coín at the usual whirlwind pace, turning so suddenly off the road onto what looked like a goat path that for a moment we were airborne, to a chorus of surprised screams from Paddy and I.

'Yew boats shouldn't be frotted,' Diego remarked. 'This track's a beech, but yew boats okay wid me.'

The sylvan leitmotif to Diego's speech was beginning to get me down, as was his driving and the two dreary shacks we had seen that morning, both with scrawny half-starved dogs tethered outside as a cheap form of security as most Spaniards are terrified of dogs. Apparently, it's normal to leave dogs chained up all week, with maybe a couple of visits to feed them chicken carcasses. But it was difficult to see the point because with the dog securely chained at the front of the house, a quadriplegic on Mogadon could break in at the back.

We now had only one more property to see.

'Thees is a wonnerful house I show, yew wood love it at once for the *vista*, but vary expensive from theese Danish, how yew say, les bion lady,' Diego remarked.

For once, he was right. Finca Tara was perched on the edge of a bluff overlooking a spectacularly beautiful green valley with a backdrop of mountains. The only signs of habitation were a couple of tiny whitewashed shacks half hidden by trees on the slopes opposite. Below us hoopoes *popopo*'ed as they looped in their curious catenary flight into the eucalyptus trees. Walking through the front door, the first sight that greeted the visitor was of a yucky brown, none-too-clean lavatory. The kitchen was hideous, with '60s pseudo-wood formica cabinets set off to perfection by virulent orange tiles, and the wiring and plumbing was pathetic. Water came from a rat-infested well in the three-acre olive grove 200 feet below. The house was far too small and had no pool, telephone or garden, and we couldn't afford it anyway – in short, it was perfect.

2.
The Goat Wife

It was Christmas Eve - after a day spent moving in we were sitting on the terrace of *our finca*. Well, technically it was still Ulla's *finca* as she had given us a 'mortgage' as part of the deal, but we had made the emotional and financial commitment. With glasses of *cava* in hand, we pondered the huge step we'd taken. On the face of it, there was no contest: at 5pm on Christmas Eve in England it would be dark, cold and probably raining on the scurrying crowds of frenzied last-minute shoppers. While they were being tempted by festive bumper packs of toilet rolls decorated with holly leaves, we were sitting admiring the mauve and dove greys of the Serranía de Ronda mountain range in the far distance. Closer to hand the soft tones strengthened into the rich winter palette of green and gold spiked with citrus orange that swept down from the foothills and into our valley.

The valley, although cultivated, was otherwise unmarked by civilisation. There were no power pylons or telegraph poles, no metalled roads or street lights, just a couple of whitewashed *casitas* used by families who lived in the town, but liked to nourish their peasant roots by working the land at weekends.

From our perch on the edge of the bluff the land fell away steeply to the deep, narrow *río* (more of a stream) that marked our southern boundary, with the little tiled well house on the bank almost hidden by eucalyptus and poplars. Native Americans call the poplar 'the noisy tree' because it shivers and rustles its silvered leaves in the slightest breeze, but they were silent now in their winter nakedness.

On the other side of the *río,* our neighbour Antonio's *huerta* was a model of neatly pruned fruit trees stockinged with whitewash, and rows of ordered vegetables grown both to feed his family in Malaga and to produce income. Every week he loaded his van and took produce to the village shop in La Cabra and to the market in Alhaurin el Grande, earning barely enough to provide the necessities of life for himself and his aged father.

The hillside facing us was mostly dotted with gnarled and heavily-productive olive trees, the soil around them harrowed

into swirls as intricate as the raked gravel of a Japanese Zen garden. Dotted here and there were glossy-leaved citrus orchards and tiny vineyards, just large enough to provide for family and friends, and the odd stranger within the gates.

Salvador's land, which was just within sight, looked different: perhaps because he was younger than Antonio and had more enlightened ideas. His patch featured artichokes and asparagus, apricots and kakis. Salvador had paid us a visit within hours of our arrival, bringing a present of leeks fresh from the earth.

'*Bienvenido*, why are you here, are you rich?' he enquired as he enthusiastically shook hands, leaving muddy smears on our comparatively clean fingers. It was our first experience of the disconcerting Spanish directness; if they want to know something, they ask.

'No, Salvador – we aren't rich, we're here to work.' We did our best to explain what we hoped to do, but Salvador looked increasingly baffled.

Finally he grinned and shook his head. 'Nobody would want to come here for a holiday; they only want the sea and sand down on the coast! But if you need anything, I'm across the valley.' He pointed at some terracing. 'The house is behind those trees, but mind the dog, he is *muy feo*.' Salvador bounded down the slope below the terrace and jumped the stream, turning for a last wave.

Although the *finca* was only a mile from the village of La Cabra, four miles from Alhaurin el Grande and 12 miles from Malaga, this was Andalucia at its most rural. Our little valley was a microscopic wrinkle in a much larger altiplano, the fertile bed of a monstrous Cretaceous estuary bracketed between two mountain spines, the peaks of long-extinct volcanoes a reminder that this is seismically-active territory, with fault lines running from Antequera to Granada and out into Malaga Bay. The last big earthquake – which killed or injured over 2,000 people in the Malaga region – was a mere 100 years ago, geologically less

than the blink of a Tyrannosaur's eye.

But back to Christmas Eve. We'd had enough bubbly to find everything cosmic: the crystal clear air, the saturated colours of the countryside, and the alien smells and sounds. The addition of a flaring sunset of carmine, saffron, regal purple and apple green simply added icing to the wow factor.

We were brought back to earth with a bump by the sound of a cat being copiously sick. Smoo, the Imperial Rabbit, had chosen our bed to regurgitate assorted lizard body parts and his supper. He was a very British sort of cat; a large stocky tabby with spectacular markings on model-glossy fur. Reserved, cautious and, in general, picky about his food, he didn't cause much trouble – except when he had to go to the vet. Keeping him in a cat carrier was like trying to keep mercury in a string bag. He didn't like being petted, but decided for himself when an emotional one-on-one was called for, and his victim had to submit to a hot'n'heavy needle-clawed lap squat as he lay rigid and awkward as an encyclopaedia on one's punctured knees.

I didn't scold him about the lizard as the sea voyage and journey through Spain from Santander had been as hard on him as on us. This was his way of saying he was upset in the full sense of the word, whereas young Luigi, a small black cat with a waiter's immaculate white shirtfront and white socks, was much more upbeat. He'd been luxuriating in the sun all day and exploring his new territory. Hardly more than a kitten, he had no preconceived notions about *his* world.

On Christmas Day we were awakened by hot sunshine spearing through the curtains and took our breakfast on the terrace. The contrast between the England we had just left and this warmth and light filled us with enthusiasm and energy, and we were going to need all of it to get Finca Tara open by April as the farmhouse holiday business we had planned. Ulla, the Danish lady from whom we'd bought the *finca* was a delightful person, but even she would have admitted that it was in a hell of a state.