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## **THE SIERRA DE GATA - A REFRESHINGLY DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEW**

As an English-born Devon lass who has spent most of her life in Spain, essentially in the Balearic Islands of Mallorca and Menorca, I would like to share my impressions of three small villages, situated in the North-West corner of the incredibly beautiful region of the Sierra de Gata, where I came to live in 2005. I have always lived as a Spaniard rather than an ex-pat, having married a Mallorcan in 1967 and thus automatically acquiring the nationality, and was immediately absorbed into the local way of life by my husband's family and friends. When, on my father's death, I brought my mother over from England to live with me I had the opportunity to regain some of my British roots, but I still feel qualified to give a completely different insight to the Spanish way of life in general. I would be very flattered to receive any comments or be able to answer any queries – it would give me great pleasure to be of help to people maybe considering purchasing property in this area and needing more information before their final decision.

I look forward to hearing from you and hopefully meeting you here soon.

Jacqueline (Jakki) Cosway

Valverde del Fresno – 10890- (Cáceres)  
Extremadura.

[jakki@extremacasa.com](mailto:jakki@extremacasa.com)

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## SIERRA DE GATA – CÁCERES - EXTREMADURA

In the north-west corner of Extremadura close to the Portuguese border, about 120 km from Cáceres, is the Sierra de Gata. This is one of the most beautiful areas of Extremadura with its own micro-climate classified as Mediterranean in spite of its distance from the coast. Being used to the tremendously high humidity level of Menorca, and with osteoarthritis problems, I was more than pleased to find the climate a lot more bearable.



Being about 600 metres above sea-level, with the highest peak reaching 1492 metres, we always seem to have a breeze during the summer, which makes for very pleasant evening suppers on the terrace, and during the heat of early afternoon we sometimes put the air-con units to work and stay indoors for a couple of hours, but that isn't necessary every day. Most locals don't go in for private pools – in fact, most people prefer to avoid the

hassle as there is an excellent local one just down the road, with lawns to sit out on and a cafeteria for refreshments – as indeed with all the other villages – in fact we often just use our garden hoses to cool each other down !!!

As for the winter, well, yes, it does rain - (thank goodness!) - but never enough to become tiresome. If you compare with living in England when one can go weeks without seeing the sun, here it usually makes a welcome change as you know that before long we'll be back to blue skies with the added bonus of lush greenery as a result of the wet days. It can of course get a bit nippy at times during the winter, and most of the locals have wood burners, with some opting for oil-fired central heating, but quite honestly, I wouldn't put it as a priority.

What are very useful are the individual aircon/heating units which acclimatise a decent-sized room in 5 minutes and work out very economical.

The region is at the moment about 3-4 hours drive along newly built motorways from Madrid, although when the final stretch of the AVE – high speed train - is eventually completed this time will be reduced considerably. From Lisbon the distance is also only 2-3 hours, and the whole province has excellent coach connections to all the main towns.



I would however also thoroughly recommend a couple of taxi/car share services at a very reasonable price, which I and my family have personally used. They are local people who provide a very useful service from the villages to Madrid and back, and are used by many who wish to go to the capital for doctor's appointments, shopping, to the theatre, or for airport departures and so forth. When my

cousin visited me, I sent them her photo of what she would be wearing and there was no trouble at all. They met her at the meeting point in Arrivals at the airport in Madrid and brought her right to the door in Eljas. The journey took about three and a half hours, including two stops, and cost per person each way about 50-65 Euros, which is less than it cost her to go from her house on a 20 minute ride to Heathrow! Very well worth bearing in mind.

The Sierra extends as a range of hills from the three villages of Eljas, Valverde del Fresno and San Martín de Trevejo, famous for their unique language of "A Fala" (an ancient sub-dialect - still in full use today, although the main language spoken by all is Spanish), and follows along the border with the Province of Salamanca as far as Robledillo de Gata, and south to include Vegaviana and the larger



town of Moraleja. The whole region is dotted with a selection of quaint mediaeval villages, several of which still boast ruins of ancient castles and monuments dating back to Arab times, with the houses built from local stone. In spite of its rural nature, no village is further than 40 minutes drive from the modern local hospitals in Coria or Plasencia, or a little further in Cáceres, boasting specialists in all fields of medicine.

All villages have mains electricity and water supply, telephone and broadband Internet access, although many country properties also have their own artesian wells, and rural satellite Internet connections are available.



The countryside is incredibly beautiful and fertile, with an enormous range of wild life and vegetation, abounding in the indigenous oak, chestnut and beech trees. The whole area has an abundant water supply, ranging from springs and tiny streams which swell when it rains, to large lakes and reservoirs, which in turn supply

natural swimming pools, completely free of charge, and many with lawns for relaxing and bars or cafeterias for refreshment.

Accommodation is provided by a large range of country guesthouses, some of which can be rented as a whole, but mostly with a special, cosy rustic style which is very appealing to all.

Reminiscent of Dartmoor in Devon with its huge smooth granite boulders left over from the ice-age, rolling hills and spectacular views, the Sierra de Gata is a must for country lovers. Geared to peaceful rural life, the country walks are endless around fields full of sheep and beef cattle, offering the unique experience of waking to the sound of cow bells instead of traffic. The villagers are very much into horses and ride either their own mounts or from the local stables, and it's not unusual to see



a whole procession belonging to the local association "A Revolera" out for a ride on a Sunday morning – or for a special day outing often as far as Portugal.

The Sierra de Gata is renowned for its gastronomy. The total absence of heavy industry gives way to local ones, in which the elaboration of Extra Virgin olive oil stands out, having reached international fame and winner of a great many prestigious awards. In addition, the local goats' cheese, honey and wine are very popular as cottage industries and the whole region has a wealth of craftsmen, including the famous lace-makers, who sell their wares at the regular village fairs.

Although many of the locals are fluent in various European languages, very few have any knowledge of English, England not being a country included in the emigration destinations where many of the locals worked during the 1950's and 60's. There is however a strong movement nowadays, especially in the schools, to improve on that situation and many adults are now also studying English in their spare time in order to upgrade to the standard of other areas of Spain. As for immigration from other countries, the only foreigners I have encountered in any of the villages are a handful of Portuguese and a Swiss lady who married one of the locals when he was working in her country plus a couple of Chinese and Arab stores. Obviously, that doesn't take into account my clients of various nationalities who have bought properties in the area!

On the next few pages you will find a description of the three most important villages of my area, but it also holds nearby Cilleros and the mountain village of Villamiel, both well-known for local wine production, plus the tiny hamlet of Trevejo, complete with ruins of an ancient Arab castle...

## ELJAS - 970 inhabitants



Apart from a very interesting ancient history, these villages, and in particular Eljas, also have an intriguing modern history, starting back in the 50's/'60s when there was very little work in Extremadura with the result that, fortunately for the locals, groups of people from various European countries came over to recruit workers. A very large percentage of the locals took advantage of the opportunity and ventured into the unknown, often leaving wives and children behind, or even just the children with their grandparents.

What was different from the emigration of today is that most people had a contract and a decent wage plus accommodation provided, even though some of them didn't fare as happily as others.

The inhabitants of Eljas were sent mainly to Switzerland, although a smattering ended up in France, Holland or Germany, and most of them stayed at least 20 years. The majority were put to work exceedingly hard in the various factories, bearing in mind that these were not skilled workers and didn't understand the language, but some were lucky enough to learn a trade and managed to work their way up to a higher position.

Many decided to make their new country their home, and their children were born there, being given all the same facilities as the local schoolchildren and many indeed took the opportunity to study a career – which they wouldn't have been able to do in Spain – and became doctors, architects, lawyers, engineers, etc.

The ones who returned home brought with them a substantial amount of savings which they invested in buying land, animals for grazing, and building a variety of homes – some rather plain and functional, but also many beautiful villas emerged.

Those who returned before retirement age with no work available in the village either opted to return to the land, or took another way out; they invested in a host of little bars. At one time the village of Eljas had under a thousand inhabitants and over 25 bars! That way they were able to qualify for their retirement pensions, and as everyone slowly reached retirement the little bars were gradually closed down and nowadays only about six remain in the centre of the village.

However, those who had managed to learn a trade settled down to business thus providing the village with an excellent electrician, plumber, car mechanic, plenty of skilled workmen and a wrought iron specialist who also installs aluminium carpentry and double-glazing. It also boasts a very large warehouse just a couple of kilometres down the road with all manner of building materials and the like, which of course accounts for the ease with which houses can be built or reformed in a minimum of time.

The village itself has its own assortment of small food-shops, butchers, clothing shops and so forth, plus a chemist and local doctor's surgery, although Valverde, just 4 km. away, provides a very competent 24 hr. emergency service.

We also have a situation which is being repeated all over Extremadura, in that many of the emigrants have decided to stay in their adopted countries or other areas of Spain, resulting in lots of old houses appearing on the market as the various grandparents die, leaving their homes to their descendants, the vast majority of whom want to relieve themselves of the burden of extra property and are selling very cheaply.

There is also a tendency in all the villages to spruce up the centre and recover many of the original stone façades which over the years were cemented over and whitewashed. Eljas in particular received a grant from the Province to recuperate the façades of both the local Church and the Town Hall with delightful results.

The next thing on the agenda for the Town Hall is the partial restoration of the old castle and tower, much of which is missing as the enormous blocks of granite were put to good use by the locals to build their own houses!

Eljas has a lot going for it as a village. Built on the side of a hill, the narrow, twisted streets and alleyways, the stone houses – many incorporating huge granite boulders as a feature - the most magnificent views, the friendly locals, the benign climate, excellent soil, delightful country walks or rides, total absence of pollution and, above all, the peaceful and tranquil surroundings, contribute to make this village in the beautiful Sierra de Gata a highly desirable area to live in.

## VALVERDE DEL FRESNO – 2.400 inhabitants



Slightly larger than the other two villages, Valverde del Fresno started on flatter land, although over the years it has been steadily creeping up the hillside in various directions, affording spectacular views from the more modern villas built in recent years. The centre has some very attractive old stone buildings, although as in so many of the other villages many have been faced with cement and then painted over, the locals seeming to favour bricks instead of stone for many of their houses, although I see there is now a tendency to recuperate the old stonework, which is contributing a lot to the style of the village.

One can still find however some very attractive old stone houses for sale, affording splendid opportunities for renovation projects, and Valverde is home to a couple of very reputable builders. There are also several good carpenters and a competent blacksmith and metal worker, although, as in most of the area, actual industry limits itself to the production of olive oil, wine and honey.

In the village centre there is are several small clothing shops, butchers, grocers, stationers, general stores, electrical goods, etc. and a large, well-stocked supermarket, with fresh fish available two to three times weekly. There are also some excellent car mechanics and this village also boasts the only computer technician for miles around!

For the visitors, there is a Hotel in the centre in addition to several smaller rural Hostals, apart from a camping area on the outskirts, all very reasonably priced, and naturally the village has its quota of bars and restaurants. Valverde is home to two schools, Primary and Secondary, and as I have already mentioned, an efficient Health Centre with 24hr. emergency service. Maybe not as picturesque as the other two villages, Valverde del Fresno is nonetheless a very pleasant place to live in and is only 15 km. from the Portuguese border which is reached either directly along the main road or via a winding mountain road with spectacular views.

## SAN MARTIN DE TREVEJO – 880 inhabitants



San Martin de Trevejo is my favourite village of the three. Originally part of the Province of Salamanca, San Martin has set itself slightly apart from the other two villages and is a historical treasure. Fortunately for the village itself, the local authorities realised the importance of preserving the village centre and its beautiful stone houses with overhanging wooden eaves and balconies, which means that nowadays any renovation project in the village centre has to comply strictly with the corresponding rules and regulations. All these factors contribute to the unique atmosphere of this village with the added enchantment of little narrow streams running down the centre of cobble streets, which in turn house several wine cellars or bodegas, many of which have been converted to charming bars and restaurants and a couple of shops where local products such as honey, olive oil and various liqueurs are on sale.

For the visitor, again there is a handful of small and beautifully decorated Rural Houses or Hostals. The main square, with its arched walkways along one side, affording terraces for several pleasant bars and restaurants, has as its focal point the lovely old building of the Town Hall on one side and an old stone fountain in the centre, through which also runs a little stream – a favourite paddling place for the children on warm summer evenings!

San Martin is also the coolest of the three villages, and very few private houses have air-conditioning installed.