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Las Vegas Altas del Guadiana

By Sharon Mozzi

I left England in 1992 to move to Lanzarote where I lived for 11 years. I then bought a house in Andalucía which I reformed, lived there for 3 years then sold. Then it was decision time! Where to move to? I was looking for somewhere typically Spanish which could offer me peace and tranquillity away from the tourist destinations. When looking around the South of Spain I came across the lakes in the area of Vegas Altas, an hour south of Trujillo in Extremadura, and fell in love with the area immediately. I now live there with my family in a house which I had built near Orellana la Vieja.

Extremadura is a rugged, beautiful and above all friendly area which time (and developers) seems largely to have ignored. Yes there has been progress, particularly regarding communication - roads, telephone and internet and with health and education, but the core values whereby the Spanish treasure family, friends and nature remain intact.



British people or fluent English speakers are few and far between in this part of Spain but don't worry if you don't speak the language, help is at hand as Spanish lessons are available locally.

On the next few pages I have provided a description of the area where I live and the lifestyle, I hope this whets your appetite!

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

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Las Vegas Altas



Las Vegas Altas del Guadiana – the high plains of the river Guadiana – is a region of the province of Extremadura about an hour south of Trujillo and lies about 350 metres above sea level in a land of low mountains and flooded valleys along the route of the Guadiana River.

The river and tributaries have been dammed in several places and form a network of huge lakes which provide irrigation to a vast area of nearby land via a network of canals.

The lakes provide a haven for birdlife and wildlife and the area has been designated a protected area under the United Nations REMSA convention. Whilst retaining the protection of wildlife habitats the sheer size of the lakes also provides ample opportunity for the pursuit of leisure including swimming, sailing, water skiing, scuba diving and, of course, fishing. The lake at Orellana lake has been awarded the blue flag by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE).

Entrepreneurial people are already starting to make the most of the unique opportunities for fishing in the area. The lakes hold carp, pike, and black bass amongst others and every November the annual pike fishing championship is held in Orellana with people coming from all over Spain to compete. Bird watching is also extremely popular here with a wide variety of species to be seen at different times of the year. There is also a local ramblers club.

The canal system often runs alongside paths or tracks which provide a brilliant network of off-road routes enabling exploration of vast areas of unspoilt countryside. The irrigated lands are used to grow a wide variety of crops and fruit and are interspersed with large areas of traditional 'dehesas'; holm and cork oak meadows used to raise cattle and black pigs, source of the renowned jamón iberico.

I live near Orellana la Vieja which is in the province of Badajoz, the more southerly of the two large provinces which make up Extremadura. The whole area around Orellana is akin to the English Lake District but on a larger scale, and with a lot less rain and virtually no tourists!



Summers are long and hot but comfort is usually maintained by a cooling breeze off the lakes. Winters tend to be short and cold in the mornings and evenings but with frequent sunshine to wash away the blues and provide crisp enjoyable weather ideal for walking or cycling. When the sun is high in a cloudless sky – as it often is – it can feel very warm even in mid-winter; frosts are extremely rare.

The man-made lakes - Orellana, Zújar, García Sola and Serena - are among the largest reservoirs in Europe; this large expanse of water has tempered the local climate which is now equivalent to its Mediterranean neighbours with almost year-round sunshine. Essential rain to top up the lakes does come, usually in short torrential downpours, but constant day after day rain is virtually unheard of.



During summer an Al Fresco lifestyle is the norm; in the mornings and again in the evenings a lot of families go down to the lake. At weekends, during the evenings, many families stay until the small hours with picnics, singing and dancing. The facilities near the lake are excellent and during the summer and fiestas there are bars, restaurants, swimming from man-made beaches, sailing and canoeing, covered picnic area, moorings and even an outdoor stage and cinema.

During the summer weekend evenings, the main village street is closed to traffic and all the bars and restaurants have tables outside. Children are able to play safely in the street whilst the adults just roam from bar to bar; it's a lovely family atmosphere.

Orellana and the neighbouring villages range in size from very small hamlets to bustling towns – especially on market days.

These communities provide a wide choice of lifestyle for anyone wishing to experience `real` Spain. Although the homes and way of life in each village may look similar each still has its own unique features and attractions together with proud traditions of local fiestas and celebrations.



Five minutes drive from Orellana la Vieja, on the way to Navalvillar de Pela, lays Orellana la Sierra, locally known as Orellanita. This is a small village nesting on the slopes of the Sierra de Orellana with fine views out over the lake. In the sierra live wild boar, deer, rabbits, hares and many other animals.

Navalvillar de Pela is a bustling small town which really comes to life each January during the fiesta for San Antón; this is the traditional fiesta where animals and pets are taken to be blessed. In Navalvillar they take it seriously and the whole town seems to party on horseback until the small hours – it's great fun but not for the fainthearted!!

A little further away are Pueblo de Alcocer and Esparragosa, both close to the largest of the lakes, the Embalse de Serena. Pueblo de Alcocer boasts a medieval castle which sits atop the village and commands wonderful views for many miles over the whole area – the locals have also thoughtfully provided an adjacent bar and restaurant with similar views!! Esparragosa sits below Pueblo de Alcocer and is a typical small Spanish village with quaint white houses dotted around a pretty town square. A short walk from the village centre takes you to the shores of Lake Serena. This lake has seen practically no commercial development and remains a beautiful haven for wildlife.



Further to the West are the thriving towns of Don Benito and Villanueva de la Serena. These are fairly large neighbouring towns (city status in Spain) with populations of over 50,000 and form the commercial hub of the area. They are the places to go for serious shopping or if still you hanker after dining on international cuisine.



Both towns, sorry cities, are proud of their traditions and prosperity and there are numerous manicured gardens together with roundabouts adorned with displays of antique farm equipment or the most precious local asset – water – in the form of magnificent modern fountains.

The brief description of the towns and villages above hopefully gives you a flavour of this unique area but there are many more each with their own traditions and beauty.

Orellana la Vieja itself has a population of about 3,300 people but you only seem to notice this when there is a fiesta on. Dare we get onto fiestas.... well there are quite a lot here!! They last from 1 – 5 days at which time there are activities for the children and entertainment for all. Fiestas are party time and usually include some kind of FREE food and drink as well as live shows, music and fireworks.

One of the fiestas is Satísimo Cristo in mid September, which goes on for 5 nights. Many of the village people form groups known as 'peñas' and they reserve an area in the main square where they put their tables and chairs. Every night they take along their own food and drink for the celebrations. For those who don't want to form a peña, the local bars are open all night. There is live entertainment



on stage in the way of Spanish groups offering modern day music to Paso Dobles and the centre of the square is made into a dance floor. There is something for all ages and you will find families from the grandparents to grandchildren out enjoying themselves until 5 in the morning. Another fiesta is San Isidro (patron saint for farmers)

held in May. There is a procession of floats and horses from the town to the countryside, where a mass is held for San Isidro and then a free lunch of cheese, ham and obviously wine to wash it all down. There is then a disco and all this goes on until midnight.

Orellana offers a club which you can join and they have various trips and activities going on. They organise trips away, for example to the north of Extremadura in mid February where you can see the snow. They also arrange BBQs, star watching, bicycle rides, camping and various water sports.

Away from the leisure area the lakes are much more subdued and become a haven for wildlife. Access is still relatively easy but you will find people are few and far between.

We are very lucky to have a good health centre that is open 24 hours a day and also has a 24 hour ambulance service. The closest hospital is about 30 minutes away and the hospital service is very good.

There are two good schools here; one for 3 – 12 year olds and the other provides education up until 18/19 years old. Most villages in the area have their own primary school, but the children who live there get the free school bus to the larger towns for secondary education. The schools also offer afternoon activities and the primary school has lunchtime dining facilities.

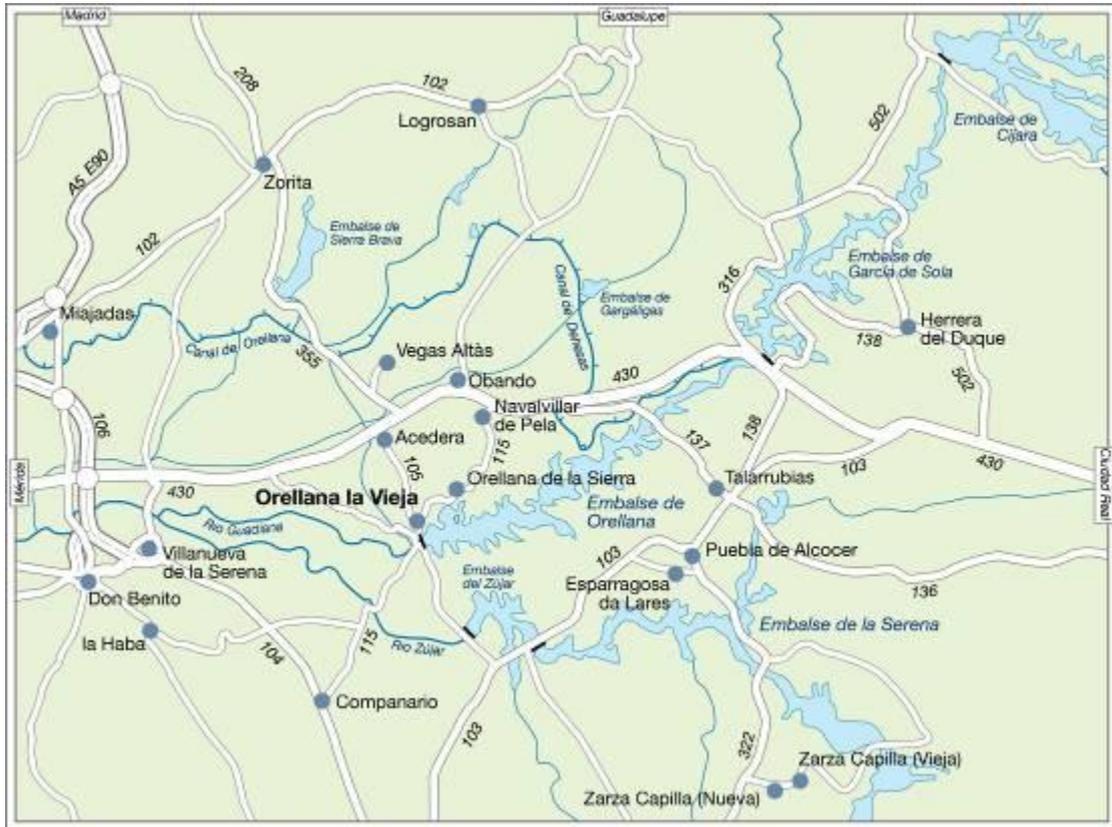


Regarding shopping, you can basically get most things in the village; there are two very good butchers and two supermarkets as well as many other smaller shops. Also there is a good street market on a Saturday which sells local produce along with clothes, shoes, pots and pans etc. If you prefer designer shops then a half hour

drive will take you to Don Benito where you have lots of nice shops and there is a very big Carrefour hypermarket

The region is around 3 to 4 hours drive from Madrid, mostly along empty, toll-free motorway routes. It is also a similar travel distance to Lisbon and Seville takes around 2½ hours. The low cost airlines fly into all these destinations and good value car hire is available.

For those who do not wish to drive there are excellent coach links with two coaches a day going from Orellana and nearby villages to Madrid. Private hire taxi firms also provide regular mini bus services to major airports and stations.



Las Vegas Altas

I hope this has given you a flavour of our beautiful area and please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions, or even better come and visit us soon. I look forward to meeting you.

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