

# BUILDING *the dream*



DAVID AND CHRISTINE CROWTHER MOVED FROM LINCOLNSHIRE TO SPAIN VIA THE STATES. UNABLE TO FIND A HOME THEY LIKED, THEY DECIDED TO TAKE THE LESSER TRODDEN PATH OF SELF BUILD. HERE THEY RECOUNT THE JOURNEY ALONG THE ROCKY ROAD TO THEIR NEW LIFE.





Our story starts in the USA. We moved there from Lincolnshire in 2003 on a five-year investor visa, having bought a small business. Four years later, with the end of our visa in sight, we had a major decision to make. The requirements for visa renewals had become far more difficult to fulfil during our time in the States, and were now only available for up to two years. Being of retirement age, we came to the conclusion that we needed more than a two-year horizon. We enjoyed the lovely warmth of Florida, and at the prospect of returning to English weather, we instead turned our thoughts to Spain.

We started reading up on the subject, relying on magazines, particularly *Living Spain*, for details of climate conditions, geography, and guides to the regions. Murcia seemed to tick most of our boxes so the next logical step had to be a visit. We were daunted at the prospect of finding and buying a house in a country nearly 5,000 miles away and where the local language was alien to us, so we decided to use an agent. We spotted an advertisement for ADS Property Services which said, 'we will find your dream home for you at no cost to yourself'. We emailed them and soon received a call, talking at length about our requirements, priorities and of course budget. Maura Dunne explained that her services wouldn't cost us anything (ADS and other similar agents normally get their money from the vendor) and agreed to search on our behalf.

Maura came back to us two weeks later with a number of houses she had found that came roughly within our specification. We arranged a visit, which Maura helped with, and although our trip to Spain

did not result in finding a house and location that we liked, it gave us a taste of Spain and provided Maura with a better idea of our requirements. One of our priorities was a peaceful location and we quickly discovered that the coastal areas are not only more expensive but also more densely populated. After a few days, we were quite sure that we had made the right choice in choosing the region of Murcia.

We applied for our NIE numbers, again with Maura's assistance (without those it is not possible to buy a house in Spain) and eventually we returned to America safe in the knowledge that Maura would continue searching for an inland, rural property.

We made a total of four trips before finding the right property, at first concentrating on Cehegin and Caravaca de la Cruz where we did find a partly completed house that we could mould to suit our requirements.

But at the last minute, the Spanish builders decided that they were not prepared to build for us as we did not speak Spanish, so our search resumed. Another partially completed house grabbed our attention but one day the wind changed direction, revealing the pungent smell of a pig farm down the lane.

At this point, as the expiry date of our visas approached, we decided to consider the idea of self-building. Maura sent us details of some plots of land.

When buying land in Spain, the minimum area that can be purchased for building a house varies depending upon the rules of the local council; it might be 5,000 square metres for one, and 20,000 for another. We decided on a plot, met >

### David and Christine's hints and tips

- \* Be brutally honest about what property you want. Think hard about what's really important to you (positives and negatives). Tell your agent which properties you like and which you don't.
- \* Don't assume that things are done the same as back home. Always ask questions – the Spanish rarely seem to volunteer information without being asked first.
- \* Be wary of using a solicitor recommended by the builder – preferably use one from a different town and if possible get a recommendation for a trustworthy professional.
- \* Be in Spain while your house is being built. It's a very satisfying experience to see it grow, and you will save yourself a lot of anguish by making tweaks during construction before things get too advanced.
- \* Don't try and 'guess' your way through conversations with builders etc. Make sure that you know exactly what is being said, or get it in writing and have it translated before agreeing to anything.
- \* If a deadline/timetable is being discussed, the Spanish way is to tell you what you want to hear, not what the date will actually be. Remember that the word 'manana' isn't part of the Spanish vocabulary for nothing!
- \* If you are planning to live in the countryside, try to learn at least a little Spanish before you move to Spain. The more rural the location, the less English-speaking



TOP The foundations are put in, and the project begins in earnest.

ABOVE LEFT David invests in some serious machinery.

ABOVE RIGHT The roof goes on, and the project is taking shape.

RIGHT The new pool provides the perfect place to relax and enjoy the views.



IF IT SOUNDS TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE, IT PROBABLY IS, BUT NOT IN OUR CASE...

with the builder, signed a provisional contract and handed over a deposit payment to secure the land. We made sure that our solicitor had all the details so that he could start the searches. We now needed to sell our house in America, just when the market was starting to dip!

We left America and rented a house in Spain but two weeks after arriving, our furniture was delivered to the port of Valencia in Spain. It should have been delivered to the port of Cartagena 250km further south. All attempts to communicate with the carrier were ignored and eventually we had to pay another €5,000 to get our furniture released from the port and delivered to our rented accommodation.

## OUR HOUSE

Eight months after handing over our deposit for the plot, our solicitor was still waiting for information from the builder before we could sign on the line.

We decided to cut our losses – there just didn't seem to be any end in sight and we were using up much needed money on rent. Maura resumed her searches for us, and within three days we had viewed some land owned by property company Casas de Lorca and were discussing with their architect changes to a standard design of house. The builder showed us the Esqitura for the piece of land (the deeds, which proved that they owned it). We were delighted that the wording of the receipt also included a condition that in the event of planning approval not being granted for the house they would refund in full the deposit paid.

Planning approval was granted and building work began in January 2009, proceeding without a hitch. On weekly visits to the construction site we were able to tweak things and make small changes, and we finally moved in October 2009. Our house is located on 20,000 square metres on the side of a shallow valley and is 2km from the nearest village

and 20km from Lorca, the nearest city. The land has almond trees on the lower half of the slope and pine trees and wild rosemary on the upper half. We have mountains on three sides including the Sierra de Espuna Natural Park. We have called our house 'Casa del Romero'. Romero translates to Rosemary (which grows wild on the hillside) and our mothers' names were Rose and Mary.

Construction techniques differ wildly to those in England and America. The structure of the house is built first, using heavy foundations and floor, concrete pillars supporting the cast concrete ceiling/floor of the second storey followed by more concrete pillars supporting the cast concrete ceiling of the upper floor. The roof is put on next (no wood is used at all) and only when all of this has been completed are the walls of the house constructed.

Are we pleased with our new home, and glad that we moved to Spain? The answer is a definite thumbs up. The builder worked with us all the way, he was sympathetic to the changes we wanted to make during the construction and they did everything possible to ensure an early completion. After all the horror stories we had heard about Spanish builders, we consider ourselves very fortunate in finding Casas de Lorca. The saying goes, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is," but not in our case.