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If You're Thinking About Retiring in Spain

A writer tells what it's like to live in a country he fell in love with decades ago



Albondón, in Spain's Andalusia region, is only a short drive from the coast and such treasures as the city of Granada and the Alhambra palace. PHOTO: ALBION LAND

By Albion Land

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The clip-clop of a mule's hoofs sometimes breaks the silence as I gaze out my window on the almond groves and vineyards that fill this narrow mountain valley as it descends to Spain's Costa Tropical.

Tranquility is what the village of Albondón offers, in contrast to the glitz and noise of the seaside resorts only a few miles away.

I fell in love with Spain back in the '80s and spent 11 years working as a journalist in Madrid, where I met my wife and where our two children were born. I always dreamed of retiring to Spain, and wanted a return to my rural roots after spending most of my life in big cities.

Jamón serrano

I eventually settled on Albondón in the Alpujarra region on the southern flank of Andalusia's Sierra Nevada. Summers are far from blistering and winters are fairly mild, and it's only a 25-minute drive to the beach and just under an hour to Trevélez, the high-sierra town known for its *jamón serrano*, Spain's famous air-cured ham. In 2005, I bought a dilapidated stone house of indeterminate age on the edge of Albondón and hired a contractor to renovate it. It had been unoccupied for decades and looked it. It had no proper plumbing, or kitchen, and had to be completely rewired.

After just a year, it was habitable, with four bedrooms, two bathrooms and a kitchen. I succeeded in keeping many of the original features, such as the exposed beams, a wood-burning bread oven and tile floors. After further improvements over the years, I now have a cozy, rustic village house.

Now pushing 68, I retired here on my own nearly three years ago.

Albondón is one of Andalusia's famed whitewashed villages. Most of the few hundred souls here are farmers working small holdings of almonds, grapes, olives and figs. The village has three little grocery stores, two bakeries, five bars, a pharmacy and a butcher, where beef can only be had by special order. Pork is the big thing here, and a few family-raised pigs are slaughtered every winter, yielding a

wealth of sausages, chorizo, black pudding and, of course, ham. If you've got a strong stomach, you can easily wangle an invitation to the daylong event. Just don't agree to help hold any of the pigs.

Between the coast and the Sierra Nevada are miles of rolling countryside where wild oregano, thyme and fennel grow. Night skies, unpolluted by light, offer an awe-inspiring panorama of stars. There are many hiking trails, and opportunities for horseback riding and mountain biking.

And it is incredibly cheap. Each month my simple but comfortable existence costs me about \$1,600, although I own my house outright so I don't have either rent or a mortgage, and my property taxes are a paltry \$16 a month. I have comprehensive private health insurance, for which I pay less than \$150 a month. Fortunately, I've not had occasion to check out the two large hospitals less than an hour away, but have found private clinics most satisfactory for specialists. My car costs me about \$145 a month, including insurance, though excellent train and bus services offer lots of sightseeing possibilities with super discounts for senior citizens. My landline, mobile and internet cost me \$35 a month for ample basic service. And electricity, which powers most of my heating, is around \$60.



Houses in the village can be had for as little as \$30,000, though that could mean spending as much again or more in renovation costs. Places in the country, complete with mature fruit trees and vines, might set you back four or five times as much, depending on the acreage, ease of access and whether water and electricity are already connected. Be warned: For Americans, asking prices are likely to be inflated.

Don't hesitate to haggle. You'll also need a good lawyer, because the deeds on many properties are woefully out of date, and often have to be redone.

To buy a home in Spain, all a foreigner needs is his or her passport, a Spanish bank account, and a foreigner's identification number, which can be obtained at a Spanish embassy or consulate. Retirees from abroad commonly apply for a non-lucrative residence visa, which allows one to live in Spain but not work. Along with your personal details, you will need to supply a certificate of good health, proof that you have no criminal record, that you have private health insurance and that you have the funds to support yourself.

Albondón is in the province of Granada. While it may appear to be geographically isolated, it is actually just a day trip from several Spanish treasures: the city of Granada and its marvelous Alhambra palace; the Mediterranean jewel of Málaga, whose delightful old town is packed with tasteful shops and excellent restaurants; and the little-known but charming provincial capital of Almería, with its 10th century Moorish fortress and medieval cathedral. There are also at least three golf courses within an hour's drive and opportunities for sailing, windsurfing and other water sports.

Walks in the orchards

Yet I rarely leave the village and the surrounding countryside, except for supplemental shopping or a doctor's appointment in nearby towns. On a typical day, I'll take my dog for a long early-morning walk through the almond orchards, then stop in at a bar for *café con leche* and a slab of toast topped with freshly pulped tomato, tuna and olive oil—all for a shade over \$4.

I start and finish the day with prayer and spend much of the time in between catching up with all of the books I never had time to read, bingeing on Netflix and experimenting with my passion of cooking. Since leaving journalism, I've retooled as a literary editor.

Tuesday evenings I'll join many of the village's expats for drinks. They are mostly English, but also German, Dutch, Irish, Welsh and Scandinavian. On Friday nights,

many of us go to a place with excellent *tintos de verano* (a sort of poor man's sangria), superb tapas and music from the '80s.

It can get a bit lonely here during the winter, with few souls venturing out at night, but that is all compensated for during the warmth of the spring and summer, when we have two rousing festivals, with fireworks and music. At the San Isidro festival, in May, we eat a local specialty of uncooked fava beans served with salt cod, and drink a strong local wine. That will be followed by fried breadcrumbs brought to life with chorizo and sweet peppers.

The second festival, in late August, honors the village's patron saint, Louis IX, the French king and crusader, with a small carnival of local delicacies, flamenco dancing, big bands, theater and rides for the children and *trovo* for the old timers. A cultural landmark of the Alpujarra, *trovo* is a typically humorous poetic duel between two singers, who make up their verse on the fly accompanied by guitar, violin and plenty of wine.