

GRAN ALACANT

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Darren Vranjes as:

The Real Truth
Blogger

Luke Martin-Jones





Chatter

Writing is a passion of mine, ever since I was a child, writing short, funny stories; keeping myself amused and entertaining friends. As a writer, I have been published on a number of occasions. I wrote for a newspaper on the lowering of the age of consent and have had a number of poems published, in various anthologies. I am also a professional blogger, currently working on my latest blog 'Spanish Views', set in my new home town of Gran Alacant, after a life changing decision to move away from the UK and start a new life, living as an Expat in Spain!

In August 2016, I was given the opportunity to write a column in my local magazine, The Gran Alacant Advertiser. The column, entitled 'Chatter', encompasses my personal experiences and views, conversations with those who live and work here, on subjects close to their heart, as well as issues that may be headlining in the news internationally; affecting the lives of all of us who reside in this idyllic corner of the Costa Blanca.

This ebook contains the first six 'Chatter' columns, covering a wide range of subjects, important to our local community, both Spanish, British and otherwise, that are resident in this urbanisation;

August 2016	BREXIT
September 2016	COMMUNITY
October 2016	BOTTOMLINE
November 2016	EDUCATION
December 2016	VERY BRITISH PROBLEMS
January 2017	CRIMEWATCH GA

Luke Martin-Jones

Chatter

August 2016 - Brexit

It's another hot day in Gran Alacant and I've taken the opportunity to enjoy the afternoon, sat in my favourite square, Sierra Mar, The first place I frequented, when I moved to GA, six months ago. It is testament to the good folk that live here, that I have settled in well, made great friends and been accepted as part of a community, that is open and welcoming. I feel like I have been here for years.

Britain isn't far from the minds of all us Expats sipping cocktails at Zest, playing a game of Darts at Dicks or simply passing time, sitting talking to friends, who have returned from the UK, for another few weeks in the sun. The UK does seem a long way off, as we enjoy another glorious, hot day. Rain clouds over Britain, not only make for another summer wash out at home, but also the fears and trepidation of all those who have chosen to reside in Gran Alacant, and other areas, the length and breadth of the Costas in Spain!

Expat's fears are real, very real. Uncertain times make for apprehension among the community I now call home. A campaign in Britain, no information, misinformation, gossip and deception, that will affect the lives of all those from the UK, for a generation and beyond. Understandably, conversation will always include 'Brexit', as all of us who chatter in squares, try to piece together, the events that will shape the story of our lives now and in the future, and just where are we heading after such a resounding vote to leave The EU.

It's two O'clock in the afternoon, and I've just ordered my second pint of Mahou. I've moved to the relative shade, in the corner of the court yard at Zest, away from the intense sun, talking to a couple of friends, I met, which seems like a life time ago now. They are angry about what Britain has done, in voting to leave Europe. What will they do? if their rights are removed. How will they survive? Just what future is there for them in Spain, now? There is almost a panic like fear, that the end is inevitable and it will take no prisoners, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. The lack of clarity and information has left people worried and in extreme cases, putting out the 'Se Vende' sign, the day after The UK made its choice, in the hope of selling their home, lived in for a decade or more, returning to Britain, a country that they no longer know or who's links to which, have long since gone. I am appalled at the way, my friends and neighbours have been ignored in a vote that will almost certainly affect their future more than most. Politicians, rarely spoke of the future of the Expat community in Europe, because in their eyes, it was not a vote winner. Typical of politicians!

I have my own views on the 'Brexit' referendum. Due to the lack of facts and figures or credible evidence, available to me and others, I voted the way I thought was best for my home country. I voted with my conscience and not for egocentric, self gain. As a Spanish resident, I believe we have nothing to fear. Spain is not going to turf out a whole community of people, who, in Gran Alacant at least are the life blood of this small oasis on the Costa Blanca. Gran Alacant would close down over night. Spain relies heavily on tourism, especially from Britain, would they really risk, further damage to their already fragile economy, by penalising us and those who come here for their two week holiday every year, just out of spite? NO I don't think they will, it just will not happen. There will be changes, of course, but as people, we should always embrace change and use its path for a positive outcome. Change means new opportunities and a desire to make things better. We should all embrace that!

As I get ready to leave Sierra Marr to grab a bite to eat in one of the many wonderful restaurants on my door step, I bump into a Spanish friend, who I met, little more than a fortnight ago. He immediately asks how I feel about the way Britain voted. He knows I am a bit of a political animal and always have a view on subjects, that affect the lives of others. Equally, his own interest in Spanish politics and the future of Europe is always discussed, with his usual Spanish bluntness, which I so admire. He is sad that we have taken the decision to leave. Unlike politicians, he has no animosity towards my kin folk, remains pragmatic and understands why we made the choice we have. This was not a vote about race and isolation, this was about stopping the waste and encouraging changes that will ultimately provoke a positive affect on the rest of the European Union.

The sense of community, living as an Expat in Gran Alacant, is the most enduring aspect of life here. I was recently told there are over seventy different Nationalities, living and working together in this Urbanisation, all getting on, all respecting one another. Most of us, feel far removed from the events in Westminster, or the bitterness in Brussels. Gran Alacant is a microcosm of Europe, where each persons views are different and valid. We all have our own hopes and fears for the future, but we are a model that Europe would do well to emulate. Life is good here, because of those who strive to live their lives in the best way they can, forging new bonds, friendships and relationships, accepting one another, adding to the colour and diversity that make up this place. I am glad to be a part of this commonwealth of like minded individuals, a prototype for others, more disingenuous should aspire too!

The squabbling will rubble on in the UK. Residents will continue to chat in squares, expressing opinions over a glass of Rioja and a plate of tapas. The uncertainty will undoubtedly get worse before it gets any better, as the negotiations for withdrawal take place. Expatriates like myself, need assurances, that can not be given, all the time, there is political turmoil in The UK. When the dust settles, the new Prime Minister takes over her rather onerous, burdensome task and we start to see the first glimpse of our future outside of Europe, only then will the squares in Gran Alacant, be able to return to the old subjects, of weather and the cost of living. When that day comes and the infighting stops, the documents are sealed and the treaties finalised, the people I have met will finally be able to breath a sigh of relief!

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Chatter

September 2016 - Community

Last month, I spoke briefly, about the community that makes up Gran Alacant. For me as a relative novice here, commonality is the most important aspect, of why I am staying! When moving abroad, in fact, when moving anywhere different, acceptance by those you intend to live in close proximity with, is important. I had no idea what to expect, moving to an urbanization, putting a pin in a map, leaving Britain's pastures for Spain's idyllic charm and welcoming hospitality. It didn't take long to realise, conjecture proved to be very different to palpability! Almost immediately, from day one, I was acknowledged as part of a fantastic neighbourhood, very different to that, I have lived in before.

Urbanizations had a bad reputation, from Britain at least. The problem of 'land grab', especially in this region was high on people's minds. Those thinking about moving to Spain and those who already had property here, were understandably nervous. Before taking the plunge and moving to Gran Alacant, I still remained sceptical about the benefits of living in such a community development. Can all these different people, from different backgrounds, with different agenda's actually get on in practice? So far I have been pleasantly surprised. Yes Gran Alacant is a diverse place, full of colour and individuality, from all over the globe, but it is first a location to live. People have homes here, take pride in their environment, which makes for an altogether better, uplifting and generous experience!

The tourists are arriving, both home owners and others who stay for a brief few weeks a year. I have met many new faces this month, all approachable, everyone responsive and without exception, wanting to introduce themselves. This reminds me of a time when I was young, growing up in 1970s Britain. It feels right, secure and convivial, just how things should be. There is an air of polite introduction and curious interest from the people who inhabit Gran Alacant. The feeling of a bygone era, the feeling of acceptance, the feeling of belonging!

Last week I was introduced to an older couple, who had not visited Gran Alacant for a while, about eight years ago to be exact. They had decided to come back, after they cancelled their holiday to Turkey, amidst all the trouble on the periphery of Europe. They were amazed at just how much the area had changed, but happy that the small, village like atmosphere still remained the life force of this popular destination. When I walk around the urbs that make up this community, I am struck by the amount of residents who say hello, beep their car horns or just wave. This is a happy place, because people, resident or not, want to be here, enjoy the amenities on their doorstep and feel at home, around like minded individuals. They are not afraid to say so neither.

People are very content to sit in a square and talk about the reasons, that brought them to this little place on The Costa Blanca. They are proud of Gran Alacant, the life they have here and the friends they have made, as they should be. The people who live here have worked hard to turn this into a place, they can call home.

The trouble in Europe and the Middle East are strong on peoples minds. Dreadful happenings in France and Germany and the continued march of ISIS, are not far from peoples thoughts. Like the couple I met earlier, I also met a delightful young married family, down on the beach at Carabassi, all here on holiday, for the first time. Somewhere safe, they have brought their children, to play and relax for a few well earned days break, Child friendly, family orientated, a World away from the daily drudge of life back home.

I am a talker and conversationalist, and regularly go up to people, chatting away about Spain. I want to hear what people like you are talking about, what is important to you? living in Gran Alacant. Why you are here? And just what you want me to discuss in this monthly column? Nearly everyone has a view about something. Of course there is turbulence and anxiety in Europe, right on our door step and people here are, if not scared, at least aware of what is happening in the World. Even away on holiday, you can not escape the news bulletins, the extra airport security and the calls for action, from people who sit back in horror observing, dreadful atrocities, on their television screens. No area can be safe from the spectre of terrorism. Only today I read an article, where ISIS had warned of attacks against tourists in Spain, yes in our own back yard, but should we allow this threat to deter us from our daily activities? No of course we shouldn't. Carrying on, standing together as a community and remaining vigilant and aware, eyes wide open and feet firmly on the ground are the common sense approach to such words of hate!

Talking to Anita and Paul at the beach, about Gran Alacant, I am struck by a single word that keeps popping up, again and again, Community. Even as visitors, this young family are well aware of the neighbourhood that forms the life blood of GA. They have only been here for a few short days, but already have been made to feel welcome, by everyone they meet. Not only the bar and restaurant owners, but also the residents, those that live here everyday of their lives and those holiday makers, like themselves, out enjoying a vacation in the sun. Forming friendships and meeting new and interesting people is a pastime we all do on holiday. I myself have met numerous wonderful characters and personalities over many years, holidaying in this place or that. Some of whom, I still remain in contact with, even after ten or so years. Psychologically people are important to our needs as human beings; with such an open and welcoming group of people, like the aforementioned in Gran Alacant, you can always ensure that as visitors or residents, new or established, staying with family or briefly passing through, you can always be sure that you receive the best Gran Alacant offers. With so much trouble, violence and tribulation, all over the World, this region does accord the comparative safety, of a destination, that people can trust, affording credence to a dream, that those who live here keep alive!

As a relative newbie myself, I observe outside the box. I can look into this community, with a degree of neutrality. I have only scratched the surface, talking to the great and good, that make up this place, but already I have engaged with a wealth of people, I could have only dreamed about in The UK. Different nationalities, personalities, all friendly, approachable and all part of Gran Alacant, this place, I call home!



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Chatter

October 2016 - Bottom Line

The cost of living has been high up on my agenda this month. My partner recently left Gran Alacant for his home, Australia, for six months. He is returning to a Country he hasn't seen in twenty years; the employment opportunities, in Spain, just, aren't superlative. I was aware that Spain has and continues to suffer from a sluggish economy; unemployment is high, especially among the young. These were all factors to take into account, before we decided to, move to The Costa Blanca. I am only forty five years old; have at least twenty years of work left in me and want to use my skills to forge a new career.

Spain offers a life style, that many people from the UK aspire too. Who wouldn't want to live in such a beautiful, enticing, Country, with fantastic weather, culture, history and people. As a non Spanish speaker, it is hard to sustain this regime, without, access to sufficient funds or a job, that pays well enough. I have met many similar people in my position, since moving to Spain. My partner is returning home to earn money to pay for our residence in GA; he is not an exception. My closest friends in Gran Alacant, Katie and Andy are also wrestling with a similar dilemma. They want their young daughter to grow up here and all the advantages that go with it, but it remains difficult for Andy to find suitable employment commensurate with his skills and experience, to create financial security. Andy has returned home, to England, for a period, flying back to spend time with his family, when able to do so. I am personally looking forward to the new challenges ahead. My Grandfather was a Merchant Seaman, so I am well aware of families having to live apart for long periods of time. My Grandmother did it, so can I!

The costs involved in living in Spain, are much smaller than that of the UK. Rental property prices, remain low at around a third of the UK average. Similarly the Spanish equivalent of Council Tax, The Suma, is a tiny proportion of what we pay in Britain. Water rates, which are all metered here, are also substantially lower. In fact I pay in two months, what I would pay monthly in The UK. The only utility that remains greater is electricity.

Grocery shopping was my hot topic for discussion, also. I wanted to know where the best place to shop for groceries was. There are quite a few large hypermarkets dotted around the Costa Blanca region, within driving distance; for the purpose of this article, I wanted to stick to Gran Alacant. This area is serviced by Lidl, Mercadona and Consum, the major supermarkets in the catchment area. There are many other smaller shops, including Unide and Quicksave, who cater, quite well for Spanish and Expat needs alike. The prices vary widely. Unlike the UK there are very few special offers and supermarkets do not compete against one another. The opinions of people, who I asked, as to their preferences, on where to shop, varied dramatically, as I am sure it would wherever I asked the question.

Gran Alacant is a price perceptive place. I myself have become very frugal about the way I shop, also the way I cook, wasting nothing. In the UK, I was always throwing food away. Here I don't, not one thing. I freeze food that I don't eat, and shop very economically. I have learned to shop as the Spanish do. In the UK I used to spend about 160€ a week on shopping, today, in Gran Alacant I spend no more than 60€. That is a huge drop, a massive saving. The combination of lower prices, less choice and fewer junk food items, has allowed me to do what I never could in Britain. Shop within my means.

I was persuaded to go to Mercadona for my weekly shop, during the last couple of weeks. Usually I shop at Lidl; it is so much cheaper. I have always assumed so at least. Well I have to say I spent double in the Spanish supermarket and bought nothing out of the ordinary. I will be shopping at Lidl again in future. I spoke to someone I know, who has a second home in Gran Alacant, I always respect her opinions; she is a great cook who understands local customs and habits; she suggested going to Alicante meat market, with prices significantly lower. There are of course markets all over this region. All offering locally produced goods at a fraction of shop prices. However you shop here, it will be incontrovertibly cheaper. Shopping around is key, as one used to, when I was but a lad!

Taking my two cats to the local vets, was also unquestionably cheaper. Probably half as much. The standard of service does vary, but on the whole I was pleased with the outcome! From petrol stations, alcoholic beverages, eating out and Hospital bills, ones expenditure and overheads remain significantly lower!

We no longer live in an age of cheap consumables. For countries like the UK, where shopping habits are very different to the mediterranean, the pinch in ones pocket is felt most. The way one shops determines many things. Spain does promote a healthy diet encompassing fresh fruit and vegetables daily. Children are encouraged to lead healthy lifestyles. I myself walk to the shops far more often than I did in the UK and I do have money in my pocket at the end of each week. I rarely venture into the large shopping complexes out here, preferring to shop locally and stay within my weekly budget.

The cost of living continues to grow, ever upwards, as societies shopping behaviour changes. People demand more and more disposable items; Britain is a prime example of this. Spain still shops along traditional lines, as I am beginning to also. It works; you truly do save money, in price conscious times, especially in Spain, who's economy has a long way to go, in order to recover from the biggest slump since the second world war. As always, I take advice from the locals, without exception and thus far, they have been right. Local knowledge is key to success, in difficult circumstances; they haven't let me down.

So there we have it; Not a scientific study, into the cost of living in Gran Alacant, but observances from a fledgling apprentice, relatively unaccustomed to Spanish ways. If there ever was a reason the move to Spain, the costs of living is a big deciding factor. As a pensioner, your income goes much further, as an individual, you spend a lot less, as a consumer you do have less choice, but how much choice does one realistically need. Providing you follow the rule of buying locally produced food, seasonally sold, avoid the larger shopping malls and procure groceries and staples from reputable markets, you really can't fail. It is kind of like going back in time, to an altogether less complex era. To me that feels right. After many years of waste and over production, large western countries could learn much from Spain's traditional stance on 'shopping'. This is one place you can keep expenses to a minimum and I know, as time goes on, I will further learn, to be even more meticulous with the cost of living here. It really does feel good saving money, cutting budgets and changing ones lifestyle to suit the new challenges ahead!

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In & Out
by **J. Brinas**

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Chatter

November 2016 - Education

When considering what to write about in this months column, I was mindful of the closure of the summer season in Spain. As halcyon days, turn into the autumn fall, so to, the local children began their drift back to school. As someone who doesn't have children, I wanted to speak to some Mothers who live in Gran Alacant, about their experiences, with the Spanish school system. The only experience I have of the classroom , is my time spent in full time education in the UK, and work with youngsters at Action for Children, a fantastic charity, primarily dealing with disadvantaged kids. I am always interested to observe and learn about the differences in all aspects of Spanish life. The local Gran Alacant School, is just down the hill from me, I hear the children in the playground, every morning. Family is very important to the Spanish; the differences between Britain and Spain in that respect are stark but does the Spanish education system, live up to their fine example of parentage and progeny?

This October I have obtained a position at a School in Elche, teaching English at a fantastic seminary, after their compulsory school day ends. Quality care, expert tuition from dedicated teachers and staff; most importantly, at an affordable price. This general impression of the system here, was something reinforced by the Mothers, who took time out of their busy schedule, to talk to me.

Let me first talk about child care. In the UK, statistics show, that on average, the cost of childcare is 40.9% of the average wage. Personally I had friends who would pay up to five hundred pounds a week, for good quality care. In Spain, things are very different. The average percentage of ones wage, that is used to pay for child minding supervision is approximately 8.2%. Gran Alacant has an excellent pre school, for children six months to three years old. The standards offered are well over and above anything comparable in Britain and at an average cost of 217€ a month.

I was lucky enough to speak to Julie, who works at Bar Sioux, in Gran Alacant, about her experiences, sending her three year old son to Gran Alacant School. This institution caters for children up to primary age, after which all the enrolled pupils, move on to a senior school in Santa Pola. Children start school in Spain at age 3, which is a good two years earlier than their British counterparts. Initially, I thought it was far too young for a child to begin formal education, but after conversing with parents, listening to their points of view and taking notice of their needs, as well as that of their family , I was amazed at their positive response. Classes begin at 9am, as they do in The UK. There is a morning break at 11.30am; parents are asked to provide a snack for their child, from a daily list provided by the school; this ensures that the children all eat the same thing daily and no child feels left out or at a disadvantage. At 2pm, school is concluded.

For some children, especially those whose parents work, there is a scheme within schools, called 'Comedor'. After 2pm parents pay 4.25€ a day; for lunch, sleep and play time, expertly overseen by qualified teachers, who care for the children wonderfully. Now here is the big difference, the one thing Britain should learn from, the food, the choice on offer and the amazing quality. All of us remember school dinners in the UK. As a child growing up in the 1970s, I actually felt, we were given a relatively balanced diet, especially compared to UK schools today. I quite liked school dinners; to be honest it is akin to comfort food now for me; however Spanish menus are completely different, in every respect. The well-adjusted sensible 1970s diet, could not even compare to that of the selection offered in local schools here:

Children are offered salad every day. Not just a piece of lettuce and tomato either. They are also offered other hot choices, to suit every child's pallet. After looking at a menu, I could see meals, including, stew, paella and tenderloin and potatoes, as well as fajitas and less heavy meals. There is always fresh fruit and everything is cooked daily from scratch. The meals themselves are three courses long; all for such a reasonable price. For those parents who can not afford the costs involved, there is also a grant available from the local comunidad. There are many hardships in Spain, especially involving the cost of living compared to wages, so to ensure your child has a good, balanced, fresh and healthy meal every day is a priority and they certainly do it well.

Families are expected to pay between 70 - 80€ a year for books and stationery. This once again, depends on an individual's circumstances and there is a school bus that travels around Gran Alacant, which takes children to their local primary. The only downside I could see, was the lack of places in Gran Alacant School, due to the increase in child numbers. Sadly this does mean some parents having to travel further, to take their children to Santa Pola. From what Julie at Bar Sioux told me, she understands that may change next year.

I was curious to discover, whether or not the language barrier, also made any difference, when sending an English speaking child to school in the local vicinity. Julie said she had no problems; most teachers grasp of English, was not particularly great, but they were all attentive and perfectly helpful. There were times when an interpreter was needed, although, the Spanish are always happy to help when they can. To be honest, it won't take a lifetime before their children, are able to understand Spanish for themselves. As a child, the processing of information tends to be absorbed that much better, at 3 years old, it won't take long for a British child to catch up to the standards of their Spanish peers!

Education, standards and approach are very different, depending on which Country you live in. I am no expert on the education system here or back in The UK. I have seen the local school in Santa Pola, when going with a friend to pick up her child. It was modern, well staffed and on the surface at least, well appointed. Of course in Britain one only tends to hear of the downside of education; falling standards, crumbling buildings and lack of Teachers. Spain also has its own problems, with many Spanish students preferring to go to the UK to complete their education. Personally I believe, the Primary level of education in Spain, is superior in all respects to the British equivalent. Teachers here tend to command respect and are duly given it. If a child in Spain doesn't reach the required standards, they are held back a year, until they successfully complete the expected values.

Schools do seem to have more discipline in Spain. The Teachers do not take the kind of abuse apportioned by some students in the UK. Whether or not this shows in better qualifications, I am unsure. For me the jury is out on this at the moment. One thing I am sure about, is when Spanish children become young adults and leave compulsory education, they do leave with a higher level of respect for others and society in general. I am fortunate to look at Spain from an independent perspective, for that reason, I don't judge. I see great standards and good teaching, Spanish parents should be proud of what their children achieve. I hope to play a small part in that process!

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Chatter

December 2016 - Very British Problems

Not everything is perfect in paradise, all the time, as a friend here in Gran Alacant reminded me the other day. I had popped out after work, to meet a couple of friends and bumped into one of the first people I ever met in GA. She had a few things on her mind, things that were niggling away at her, things she felt strongly about. Life in Gran Alacant is by and large positive; from the weather and community to the beaches and pace of life; none of these are in question. Like anywhere however, there are still annoying aspects that need to be aired. I promised I would write what I could, expressing not only hers but many others, points of view, as well. As a writer, one has to be prepared to tackle all subjects, in order to obtain a balanced view, of any situation or circumstance, that may be of concern to local residents. Life isn't always auspicious, there are times when all of us have misgivings and concerns. This months column will aim to tackle a few of the problems, that those who live here have approached me with, asking me to highlight. The issues raised; their sobriety and importance in this community, is without a doubt, high on the local residents, list of concerns.

Bingo, yes bingo, is one of those traditional British pastimes, harmless, played by all ages and not something one would imagine to be a bowl of contention. In Spain, bingo, at least in a gambling sense, is illegal, outside of registered and authorised establishments. The ins and outs of why or whether it is justified, are not important in this article; that is a matter for the Spanish Government. What is crucial, is the feelings of those who's only crime, is to enjoy an afternoon out, in a local bar with friends, playing a game of Bingo, subsequently raided, in a manner, considered by many, as a heavy handed approach by the National Police. This left many patrons, both old and young, a little aghast at being locked in, searched, ID taken and items removed from the scene, as though everyone there were criminals. This has happened on several occasions, branding, in the words of one, more vocal resident, all of us as 'Bingo Terrorists'.

On one occasion, seven Policemen were sent to deal with a situation that could have been avoided, with less dramatic consequences. This is prize based Bingo and not a 'money making one', which does make all the difference, under Spanish Gambling laws. The British bring a lot of jobs to this area in particular; to scare the locals, many of whom contribute towards this community, was in my interviewees eyes unacceptable. A quiet word would have been far more effective and less troublesome for all those involved!

People who play Bingo are in the main from the older generation, in Gran Alacant. The upset caused, will have long lasting effects on those who play the game, many of whom have never had dealings with the Police at all. This was a community based event for socialising, especially for the elderly. Bingo is also medically recognised as beneficial in delaying the onset of Dementia and Alzheimers. An innocent game, a social event, a gathering of older people and therapy to delay serious medical conditions, not criminal activity!

The second bowl of contention I was presented with this week is the growing problem of dog excrement up and down this urbanization. Personally I don't know the history of this particular problem in Gran Alacant, but coming from Britain, I am well aware of how it used to be there. From my observances, The UK at least has been successful in dealing with this social problem. Owners are required by law to clean up after their animals, placing faeces in the bins provided.

I hadn't lived in Gran Alacant too long, before I realised that this area had a problem with dogs fouling on the local streets and their owners, not removing the offending mess. From what I have been told, at one stage there was a threat to employ a dog warden to Police this and other issues associated with our K9 friends, but by and large this has abated somewhat. With this warning, there was a marked improvement in the problem. Consequently this impence has now been lifted and the problem has returned, which is a shame for everyone that lives here.

I have been a big community activist in the past, and understand the benefits of 'People Power'. Local people want this problem eradicated and working together, they will achieve their goal. It does take everyone to play their part. Dog owners must clean up after their animals and others should remain vigilant, standing up for their rights to live in a clean environment. Gran Alacant is a lovely place to reside, it is just a shame that a small minority are spoiling it for others. Maybe a little more education, alerting everyone to the dangers to health, as well as the blight. such anti social behaviour causes, could be employed. One would hope, at least, that close monitoring of this growing menace continues and persistent offenders are helped to change their habits, creating a much more pleasant neighbourhood, for everyone to live in.

Finally, I have had several residents approach me, wanting to talk about the pavements, throughout the urbanization. Whilst the aesthetics of the footpaths are pleasing to the eye and in my view, far above anything in the UK, the practical purpose, for which they are intended, has been compromised, in the view of many who live here. The surface of the slabs used are notoriously slippery, even when it is not raining; with an ageing population who live here permanently, the hazards involved, in a simple stroll to the local shop, bus stop or local schools, can result in injury. A simple undertaking , can turn into a disaster.

It is true to say, that it rarely rains in Gran Alacant, but when it does, these pavements are a terrible hazard and should be avoided. I myself have always walked on the tarmac roads when it is wet, having fallen over numerous times, since I have lived here. Walking on the roads, does have its own problems also, especially in the less well lit areas. There has been some improvement in recent times, with some more dangerous areas, having pavements replaced or improved. There is still a long way to go though. In the interim, the local populace do what they can to avoid the worst zones.

A slightly different blog this month, but one, which includes issues, that need to be aired and spoken about. It is important that local people have a voice on all topics of interest, concern and pride, both here and abroad. Like any local town, city and urbanization, there are naturally going to be occasional misgivings and problems. With co-operation, working with the local authority or Police in conjunction with those who live in Gran Alacant, these reservations are not insurmountable.

Chatter

January 2017 - Crimewatch GA

Coming from a large city on the south coast of England, with a large multicultural influence; notorious council estates on the periphery and a violent act committed every hour, throughout the city, I was unsure about what to expect, when I moved to Spain. Like most people, when they decide to move abroad, they have expectations and a vision, of what they assume life, living on the Costa Blanca, will be like. My assumptions could not have been so completely wrong. Moving here was an eye opener; my suppositions were very soon a distant memory! Gran Alacant is a large urbanization, and as such, will suffer from criminal activity, on occasion. Up until this point, I had not experienced or witnessed any crime or problem that could be construed as deviant.

During the summer, I was made aware of tourists and residents, having money pick pocketed in the GA Centro Commercial. Whilst lunching at the Belfry with fiends, I was approached by a lady concerned about the level of crime in this area. She herself had become a victim of theft, whilst parking her car, on a busy Saturday afternoon. She brought this crime to the attention of the local Guardia, who were dealing with the ramifications, when I spoke to her. It seems, that people were coming into Gran Alacant, from outside the urbanization, people not known to the Police, taking advantage of the increase in numbers, using the opportunity to lift purses and wallets from the local populace.

This isn't an unusual occurrence in tourist areas, up and down the Costa Blanca. Unsavoury characters will always take advantage of lucrative situations. The main trouble is, the trusting nature of tourists. When they arrive here on holiday, they leave all sense of reality at home; the truth is, stealing, taking from others, robbery and burglary are commonplace where ever you are, especially on holiday. A vacation is a time when we relax in all matters, we let down our guard and disagreeable people, can take advantage of that.

With the summer season at an end and winter in full flow, Gran Alacant was far quieter, than I was used too. Restaurants and bars had closed for the winter and most tourists had gone home. At this time of year money is tight, people are fewer and jobs more scarce, than they already are.

I had been told about a robbery that had taken place, not far from where I was living. A friend had a bag stolen from their house in the early hours of the morning. Someone had forced the front window and reached through, taking her handbag, sitting on the dining table. Other neighbours living in the same road, had noticed a stranger, but like most of us, passed it by. This is not the only theft, that has happened; I myself have had items removed from my front terrace. These were objects of very little value, but the fact they were left in the garden, attracted the wrong type of person; a chancer who was just out to make a quick Euro, while the rest of us have to work. Other neighbours have also approached me, with similar stories. Items stolen from their terraces, by people unknown.

Petty crime exists everywhere; Gran Alacant is no exception. I had a message from one of my neighbours, warning me that there was a conman about in the area; wanting me to highlight the danger in this months G A Advertiser. Her tenants had been targeted by a man, pretending to be a local resident, locked out of their house. They needed 37€ to get a locksmith out. All very plausible, the sort of thing that happens all the time. The big problem here, is the transient nature of the local community. As a seasonal holiday resort, people do come and go all the time. Unless, like me, you live here all year round, which most people do not, you don't necessarily know the people next door, let alone down the road; conmen and women are well aware of this fact and prey on others lack of knowledge. As good people, new to the area, they promptly gave the man in question 50€, no questions asked. To be honest, had I been in their position, witness to his distress, I may well have handed over money as well. Nobody knows, how they would react; your gut reaction is important; if you believe something isn't quite how it should be, it probably isn't.

As a blogger, I highlighted this phenomenon , as soon as it happened in my blog, Spanish Views. The information I provided was picked up by a local resident, who I will call Mike; he approached me at Zest on a Saturday afternoon. Mike was angry; He had been looking for the guy involved and wanted me to do all I could, to help catch this thief and conman. He was kind enough to handover a lot of material, he had already collected and, like me, feels sure this man will be caught eventually. From the information Mike provided, including number plates, a description and some research he had already done, it is clear the gentleman in question probably lives outside the area. His numberplate, pointed to a location in Southern Germany. All the evidence I have, has been handed over. I urge anyone, who may have been a victim, to please contact the local Guardia.

The residents of Gran Alacant, both expats and otherwise, have shown me the importance of working together, and helping each other out in times of need. They are a great source of information and are well versed in the spirit of neighbourliness; the advice given by everyone who lives here is invaluable. When I look back at my experience of crime in the UK, it was rare that anyone would be there, giving an opinion, helping deal with the aftermath or doing what they could to prevent future transgression. This community, like many others, both here and abroad, have an agenda; They are a self organised and regulated group of people, with a common cause; working to alleviate problems and solve issues important to everyone, within Gran Alacant. At difficult junctures, I have seen citizenry at work, it is wonderful to observe!

There are of course, measures you can do now, to help prevent crime, here in Gran Alacant. I keep my gate locked at all times. This certainly helps to deter potential theft. Until recently, I never even thought about securing my terrace, but now, I do it as a matter of course, as we all should. The shutters at the front of each persons home, should also be used for their intended purpose. Yes they are there to keep out the hot summer sun, but they are also there as a security measure. The windows in homes on this urbanization, are only single glazed, so extra care should be taken, to close them at night. Try not to leave anything of value, outside your home. This will only encourage thieves and opportunists to return to your house, and others in your area, at a more convenient time. The biggest crime prevention measures, we can take as a community, is by staying vigilant . If you do see anything suspicious, report it and let your neighbours know. Awareness of any problem activity, does an awful lot to stop future crimes and anti social behaviour. Never underestimate 'People Power'.

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Thank you to my readers for their continued support. May I wish you all a happy and successful 2017!

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Chatter

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