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July 2008

Eight-page supplement




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Six houses and a forest of fig trees by the N340... yes, La Cala has changed a little over the years



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The Costa del Sol's last village really comes to life in summer, particularly with its July feria this week. We take a closer look at what is on offer

By Jon Clarke

WITH a mug of piping hot tea in one hand and the leftovers of a steak and kidney pie on the table, Stan Boardman was in a terrific mood. Now spending most of the year in Spain, it is no coincidence that the Liverpool comedian has chosen La Cala de Mijas to live. "It's one of the few places left on the coast that still has a local village feel," he tells me. "There is still a very Spanish feel and people are friendly."

Taking breakfast at Sully's Cafe in the heart of the village - a fridge-sized packet of Lambert & Butler cigarettes at his side - he was more than happy to shoot the breeze with a journalist about Spain and the colourful figures who have long inhabited the Costa del Sol. While cafe owner John Sullivan was less keen to talk, he had soon joined the conversation, as we

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Looking back to the old days

From Page 1

discussed the Golden days of La Cala when the faces included former gangster 'Mad' Frankie Fraser, Kray minder George Dixon and, of course, Ronnie Knight, who got married at charming El Oceano hotel. More recently English barman Tony King – aka The Costa Killer – worked at now-closed restaurant the Chicken Shack.

As Boardman, who has a house in the village, quips: "I was at Banditos in Marbella with Mad Frankie and Freddie only last night... We had a great dinner of broken leg of lamb, bruised spare ribs and black-eyed peas." But La Cala is a lot more than just about crims. And, Boardman is anything but the only celebrity to spend time in the Costa's last village, with Ryan Giggs and Chris Tarrant alone having visited in recent months.



VISITOR: TV star Chris Tarrant

"We've had Rick Parfitt from Status Quo and Gerry Marsden in for supper," says George Thompson, 60, who has been running the Friory fish restaurant in La Cala for the last decade. Celebrities aside, there is no doubt La Cala truly comes alive in summer,

the beach and its neighbouring restaurants buzzing for most of the day. Still remaining defiantly low rise, its back streets and two storey terraced houses have maintained a distinct Spanish feel. It is also testament to La Cala's popularity that the vast majority of these homes have been in the same Spanish hands for decades.

"Apart from one street we call Coronation Street – which was built 20 years ago, and is full of English – most of the old part is Spanish," explains Antonia Martinez, who was brought up in the town and owns fashion shop Coco.

"Unlike many other towns along the coast, most homes here have stayed in the family and pass from generation to generation. There is no way my family would sell to the



SMILES ALL ROUND: Stan Boardman and his wife enjoying a cuppa in La Cala

English or Germans. That is why it keeps its ambience."

But despite still keeping some of its original village atmosphere how things have changed.

Aside from the so-called Valley of Golf and its sprawling urbanisations north of the busy A-7, the village now has two supermarkets, a car park – rarely less than 99 per cent full – and a string of bars, including Bidy Mulligans and Streets of London. Indeed, it is only four decades ago that La Cala was little more than half a dozen cottages and a handful of fishing boats.

In one old photo (see over) clearly show how sleepy the village was. Indeed, apart from the famous old watchtower, there was very little else.

Sand lapped at the foot of the ancient tower, which was part of a chain of look-outs along the coast to warn of impending pirate attacks, while on the other side open fields stretched up to the single track N-340, a thoroughfare that has existed since Roman times. From here up to Mi-

jas village there was nothing else but rolling mountains and open fields given over to agriculture.

"It was incredibly sleepy here when I arrived from Ronda in 1970," said Alberto Ramon, 67, who owns the Smugglers bar, a typical pub near the beachfront.

"I came here looking for work, but there wasn't much about. There were no hotels and most people were incredibly poor and lived off the sea.

"Many of us worked in the fields above the main road, which were mostly given over to fig trees and vines.

We used to dry the figs and grapes to make raisins and take them by donkey to Malaga."

Almost all transport those days was by donkey, recalls Pepe Martin, 54, who has lived in La Cala all of his life.

"I was actually born in Malaga and my mother got there just in time with an hour donkey ride to Fuengirola, where she took the train," he explains.

"It was beautiful back then. The land was so unspoilt and the fields were full of life. We had an incredible

Continued next page

All about La Cala

The transport was mainly by donkey

From previous page

time growing up here. "If you had a little bit of land you could live very well, but if you lived in the town of Fuengirola with no land say, you would be pretty poor," he explains.

It was in the 1960s with the advent of mass tourism that things finally started to change, albeit at a very slow pace for La Cala, which was largely untouched by the first wave of tourism that initially revolutionised the coastline towns of Torremolinos and later Fuengirola and Marbella.

While no hotels opened in the area until the 1970s, the first English started buying property in the 1950s, according to Anette Skou, head of the Foreigners Department at Mijas town hall.

One of the trailblazers was a retired army officer Major Wilfred Blake, who bought a large plot of land on the Mijas road.

He became a travel writer, wrote a number of books and even made a short



SLEEPY: Alberto Ramon recalls the village was very quiet in 1970

9mm film, which has recently been rediscovered. Donated to the Foreigners Department, the film, produced between 1955 and 1960, clearly shows the incredible changes that have happened over the last five decades.

"It is a wonderful trip down memory lane, seeing everyone travelling by donkey and transporting fish up and down the coast," explains Anette, who set

up the department – the first in Spain – in 1985.

It was around this time that tourism really started to hit La Cala, but fortunately due to a combination of luck and good town planning the village was never built up in the same way as, say, nearby Fuengirola.

"It has managed to maintain the ambience of a small village by not allowing lots of hotels to be built along the beach," explains Anette. "In fact it is one of the only nearly virgin beaches left on the coast." But not everyone agrees that the rest of La Cala has been conserved for the best.

Many local residents and expatriates alike abhor the huge amount of development that has gone on inland from the old N-340. As gardener Pepe Martin reckons: "They have laid too many bricks and used too much concrete. The area inland has already been ruined. All the golf courses and urbanisations have broken the aesthetics of the place. It was all to earn money, but has sadly been at the expense of the countryside and the old ways of life.

"Like many places on the coast too much corruption has been allowed to go on... and there is no way it is going to stop until we have stronger laws to keep mayors and developers in check."

For the sake of the once sleepy village, which still has some of its old vestiges, let's hope it stays that way. One English couple who have recently settled in the area sum it up well. Alison and Peter Barber, a web designer from Southend, have long had a home in the area, but finally made the plunge last year. "The facts are that La Cala is still pretty smart compared to a lot of other towns" said Peter. "It has changed a lot over recent years, but you can still walk around it easily and you don't feel intimidated.

"But best of all there are not loads of football shirts with Rooney on the back."

NO ROOM FOR ROONEY: Alison and Peter Barber who recently settled in the area



RELAXING: A local resident outside his terraced home in a typically Spanish style street in La Cala. LEFT: The centuries old watchtower dominates the shoreline in central La Cala and also houses a tourism office. It also provides wonderful village views from its roof



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Pepe recalls days of Franco and clandestine radio

GARDENER Pepe Martin, 54, remembers well the day his father bought the first radio to La Cala. "It was 1962 and we used to have a group of around 12 to 15 people queuing up to listen to it at any one time. There was music, flamenco

and of course, the news carefully controlled by General Franco and his regime telling us all how wonderful everything was. "But at night we used to listen to a different independent radio station – a clandestine station – called La

Pirinaica, which you really had to work hard to locate on the airways. "It came from the former Communist Party of Spain and was emitted from various places around the country. It told you what was really going on. The programme began at

midnight and we would often listen to it until 2am. But you had to be very careful that nobody caught you listening or you could be denounced to the Guardia Civil who were very feared around here in the 1960s."

LOOKING BACK: Pepe still has clear memories of his childhood days in La Cala



Talking Point

Replace the golf courses with industry

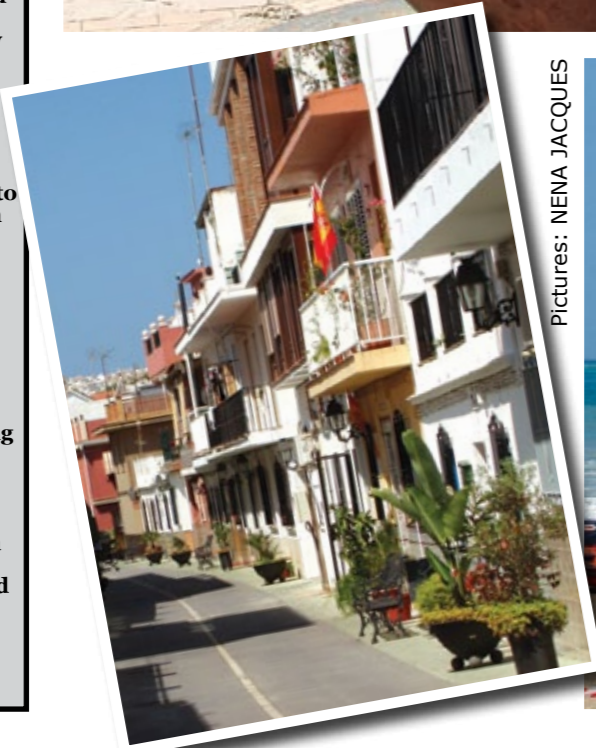
Property writer Alex Nicol has lived and worked around La Cala for ten years. But he has grown increasingly sick at the huge number of golf courses that have sprung up in recent years. The owner of Numero Uno, the first cafe/estate agent in Spain, says: "There are an incredible six golf courses in La Cala alone with another two or three in Mijas. It is completely unsustainable and unnecessary not just for the amount of water they need. It is ridiculous to build so many when most of the apartments and urbanisations around them are around 60 per cent empty at any one time.

What we need is some diversity, not just tourism and particularly golf tourism. My suggestion would be to turn a couple of them into proper housing for people. The Spanish want houses with gardens and the area could really use an industrial zone. Not some typical poligono, but an area to encourage proper manufacturing industries, to create jobs and to diversify. With 500,000 empty apartments between Malaga and Estepona anyone giving out more licences to build should be locked up immediately" added the property agent.



In and around La Cala

PICTURE BOOK BEAUTY: The recently renovated town hall (top left), the local Catholic church (above) a residential area nicknamed Coronation Street (below) the main La Cala beach (bottom centre) and one of the many typically Spanish style side streets (bottom left)



Pictures: NENA JACQUES



Your views on village life

Village is full of nice people

Mick White and his wife Dilys are typical of the English who have lived in the area for some time. Having moved here in the mid 1990s from Tenerife they now feel well integrated, particularly with their twin sons, 11, speaking fluent Spanish and playing for the local La Cala football team. Says Mick, who

owns the Buffalo Grill restaurant: "They have done brilliantly and most of their friends are Spanish. We moved here for a village way of life and have a normal villa overlooking the golf course at Chaparral and over the sea. But best of all La Cala is full of nice people and away from Fuengirola."

A lot of changes

George Thompson, from The Friory restaurant, has seen a lot of changes since he arrived in La Cala 25 years ago. "It was a really tiny place and when we used to come through here on the bus there was only one road and a couple of shops. People would get off the bus to do their shopping and then get on the next bus 20 to 30 minutes later."



LONG TIME RESIDENTS: George with his wife

Everything is here

Jeff Jones, who owns Captains restaurant, says: "We have been coming to La Cala for 25 years and fell in love with it. The best thing about La Cala is you really don't need to go outside the town. Everything is here on our doorstep."

Very welcoming

Maria Muralla moved to La Cala last year from Dubai with her husband and absolutely adores living in the village. "The climate is near perfect and we eat 'alfresco' for about five months of the year. And the local Spaniards are so welcoming".

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Property report

Housing values 'holding'

One of the few areas to hold its value over the last few years, La Cala, according to estate agents, might now even be seeing small rises.

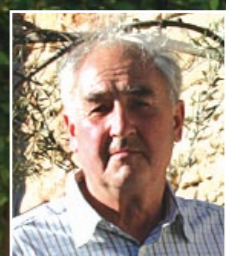
For the time being though a two-bedroom apartment in the town costs around 280,000 euros.

Desirable

A three bedroom villa in the village, which are in short supply, costs around 800,000 euros plus, while a villa on one of the nearby golf courses costs around 850,000 euros.

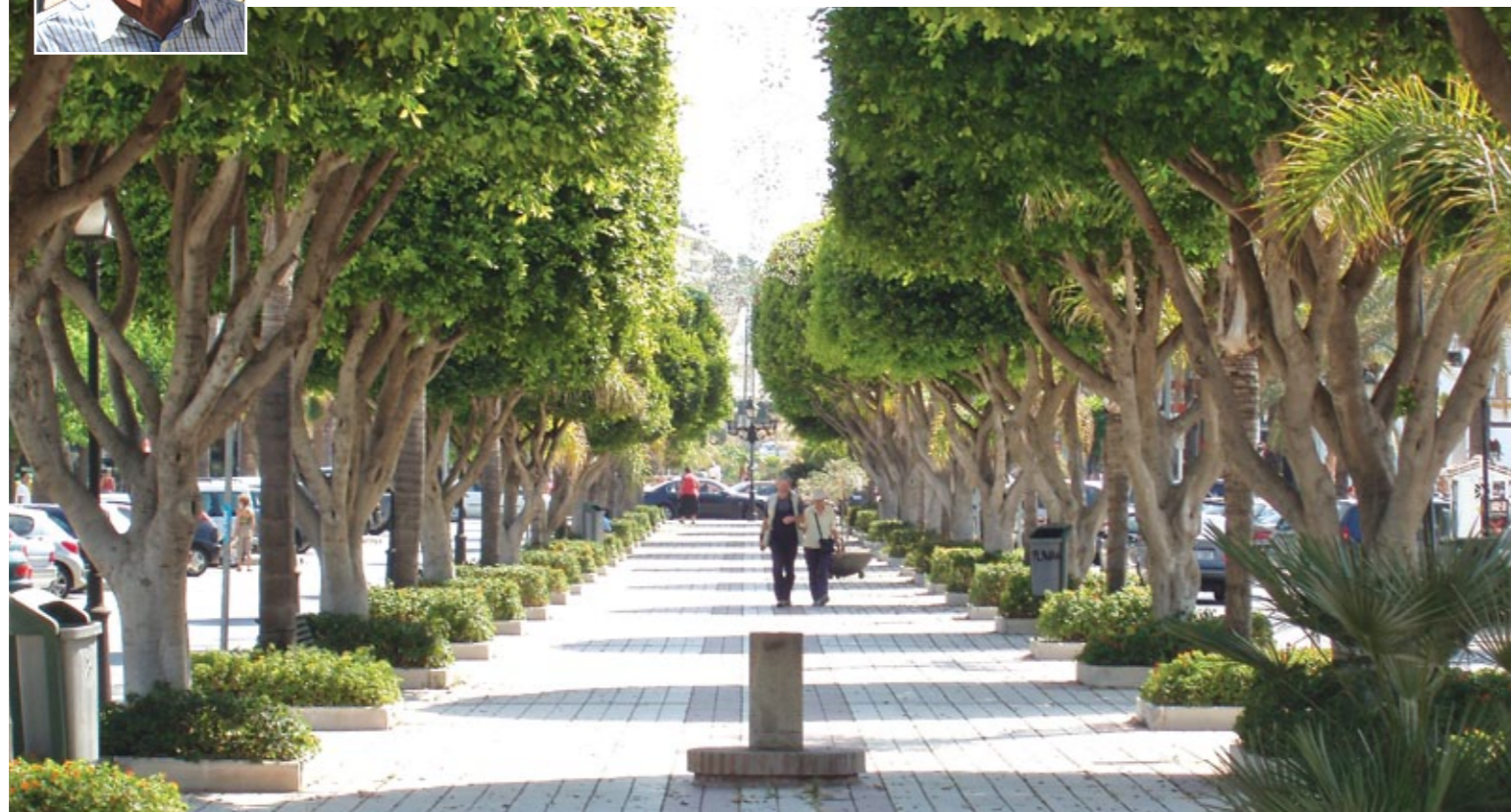
A townhouse in Coronation Street, as it is known, for its heavy English presence, costs around 400,000 to 450,000 euros.

"La Cala has held its value very well," says Alex Nicol, from Numero Uno. "It is still desirable unlike a lot of places and there are some bargains to be had."



After living in the Middle and Far East for almost 30 years, John Steadman gives

an overview of life in La Cala, where he and his wife moved to live three years ago



MAIN JUGULAR: The paseo runs along the centre of the tree and bench-lined Boulevard in La Cala

FUENGIROLA and Calahonda are the best news possible for us La Cala residents!

Don't get me wrong. I am not the biggest fan of either... nor am I your typical expat spending my days seeking out all that originates from my former homeland.

But while La Cala has not escaped entirely unscathed from the British invasion of the Costa del Sol it has avoided its worst excesses. And this is mainly thanks to Nordic-influenced Fuengirola and the British-enclave of Calahonda nearby, who soak them all up!

Yes, La Cala has bars, cafes and businesses that offer English fare ranging from fish and chips to Guinness and Sunday roasts. But the former fishing village that until recently boasted a mere 2,200 population still provides a relaxed daily lifestyle and retains much of its original Spanish pedigree.

Nestled 25 minutes west of Malaga airport, 15 minutes from Mijas pueblo, and 25 minutes to Marbella, expanding La Cala is nowadays part split by the A7.

Though it clearly possesses its fair share of property development warts - most, though not all, on the northern side of the *carretera* - the original village itself still has bags of character through clever town planning dating back decades.

The main Boulevard running through the middle of La Cala is the cosmetic and business jugular, with trees and flowerbeds lining the central walkway and wonderfully lit up during fiestas.

Not surprisingly, less than a handful of local Spanish families own the major share of its best real estate.

Apart from side street cafes and bars with mammoth televisions and karaoke sessions, La Cala tourism is mainly golf and

And the good news is

family focused.

There are no in-your-face pulsating disco bars and few noisy mopeds, though one area with homes owned by dozens of English families is nicknamed Coronation Street!

Parking is a challenge in summer, when post office queues build up with a cosmopolitan mix of Spanish, Italians, Germans, French, Dutch and British.

The Guardia Civil man a summer office, but a presence never seems actively needed in surroundings more noted for peace and quiet. With most residents willing to exchange a smile and a friendly *'Hola'*, there is warmth to local life, and while a couple of traders appear in need of happy pills, that is probably linked to the current business downturn.

Despite plans for a Malaga to Marbella train with a La Cala stop, plus a local marina, the lion's share of any future coastal changes - especially those with a foreign influence - will hopefully continue to be in Fuengirola and Calahonda.

This will guarantee La Cala remains reserved, retiring and a little bit special to boot.

In days gone by; the hamlet in 1962



...the town today



Every picture tells a story, and none more so than this photograph of La Cala 46 years ago.

In those days it did not even really qualify as a fishing village, let alone a thriving resort. In fact it comprised of a handful of houses and just a single track road.

Changes

Not even a global investor with a crystal ball could have visualised the changes destined to take place following the loosening of Franco's iron-grip rule, and the later Space Age changes throughout the Costa del Sol. In some ways sadly, things will never be the same, but it is always nice to be able to look back, and to perhaps imagine just how simple - but also how difficult - living in La Cala must have been in 1962.

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