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Expats in Spain go underground

A cave might seem a bizarre choice for an Andalusian retirement home but, Caroline Brannigan of The Sunday Times discovers, subterranean living has its advantages

When Bill Sellars was looking for a house in Spain he wanted to avoid the expat lifestyle of coastal villas, golf courses and bridge parties. So the former producer of the television series *All Creatures Great and Small* chose a 2,000-year-old mountainside cave instead.

Sellars, 79, bought the four-bedroom, two-bathroom home with Alan Sandilands, 37, last summer for £52,000 and the two of them have spent their first winter there. "We were a little taken aback by the cold," says Sellars. "But that's our fault for living 900m up a mountain."

But though the winter temperature outside drops below freezing at night, inside, the cave stays at a constant 21C all year round, making it a cool retreat in the summer months.

The high altitude has its compensations. The house in El Fontanar, an Andalusian village in the Jaen region that is 35 miles from Granada, has views from the patio over olive groves to the Sierra Nevada mountains.

"I can recommend a cave home," says Sellars, "but we looked at a lot near here where you had to stoop to get through the door and carry on stooping once you were inside. That would be very claustrophobic."

The kitchen and living room, both added, have natural light but little of it filters through to the rooms beyond. "There are all sorts of nooks and crannies, so you can light things artistically," says Sellars. Ventilation

pipes bring fresh air into the house and there are no problems with damp or condensation.

Living in a cave has one potential drawback. "There is a long corridor from the front to the back of the house," says Sellars. "If I'm in the bedroom at the back, I can look right the way through to the kitchen door and I often think, 'That's a long way to get out if there was a fire'," says Sellars.

"We made the right choice by coming inland. I wanted to be surrounded by the Spanish and to learn to speak the language. All the work we have had done has been without a word of English. And the property, the general cost of living and labour are much cheaper." As an example, he cites a bill of £366 for painting the whole of the outside of the house, plus the kitchen.

Local people have been welcoming. The village has three shops and a bakery and Alicante airport is a two-hour drive away. Malaga is closer but the drive there is more difficult.

More British buyers are turning inland from the Spanish coast in search of less expensive properties. Nick Wachter of Rusticom, an agency that covers the Granada, Jaen and Baza areas, says: "For what a two-bedroom flat could cost near the coast, you can buy a family home. Other factors bringing people inland are overcrowding, security concerns, cost of living and the desire to integrate into the traditional Spanish lifestyle."

Rusticom has sold many cave houses and Wachter believes they will prove a good investment as their numbers are limited. They can be sculpted to any shape and size and never suffer from woodworm or leaky roofs.

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