

Travel**My downshift to deepest Spain**

Paul Richardson swapped London for a farm in Extremadura, the sparsely populated region whose open landscapes and ancient cities are only now being discovered by visitors

Paul Richardson 15 HOURS AGO



My house stands on its own in a secluded valley curving upward towards a range of hills where rivers rush through rocky gorges. Below it are terraces planted with wheat and rye, oranges and olives, beans and maize. At the bottom of the valley lies a cluster of granite-built houses around a pepper-pot church: the small Spanish village that for 23 years has been my stamping ground.

Most attempts to escape from the pressures of modern urban life are once-in-a-lifetime events. I have made the move in two phases, like a driver changing gear from fourth to third, and from third to a crawling second.

The first downward shift was in 1989, when I quit my job, climbed into my little brown Mini and drove all the way from London to Ibiza. The Balearic island was an eccentric Mediterranean enclave back then, and for 10 years I lived with my Spanish lover in a whitewashed farmhouse, for which we paid a nominal rent, in the far north of the island. We grew vegetables, kept chickens for eggs and made a cool fresh cheese with the milk of a half-dozen goats.

As an introduction to the Good Life, it wasn't bad — but for me it didn't go far enough. By the millennium, Ibiza was shaping up to be a Spanish Saint-Tropez. I wanted my back-to-the-land fantasy to unfold in a place more genuinely rural, and with wider horizons, than this bonkers holiday island. Clearly it was time to move on. But where would we go?



Black Iberian pigs grazing on acorns, the traditional diet of pigs raised to make iberico ham © Alamy

During a drive across the Iberian peninsula from Lisbon to the ferry port of Dénia, chance — or destiny — made the decision for us. Both night and heavy rain were falling as we crossed the Portuguese border on a back road with only a roofless hut, once the customs post, to indicate a change of countries. We had stumbled on Extremadura — the landlocked region sprawling along Spain’s western flank — through the back door.

Immediately I liked what I saw. The wide-open landscape of this border country — especially the rolling forest of holm oaks known collectively as *dehesa* — was remarkably lacking in traffic, ugly modern buildings, or bothersome human presence. As I was to discover, Extremadura occupies an area the size of Switzerland yet its two provinces, Badajoz and Cáceres, have among the lowest population density of anywhere in Spain.

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**Donkey carts went by
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To the casual eye, the village of Hoyos looked like an idyllic survivor of the old Europe. There was something forbidding in the grey crags that loomed above the hillsides. But also something soft and familiar and welcoming about the patches of vineyard, the chestnut woods, the orchards where citrus trees spattered with

bright spots of orange and yellow lurked behind a thick, clotted mist.

John Berger, who eulogised the lifestyle of subsistence farmers in the French Pyrenees in 1979's *Pig Earth*, would have appreciated the rhythms of village life as it still was in the early 2000s: the set-in-stone routines of the olive harvest in November, the pig slaughter in December. Donkey carts went by in the square; village ladies carried the washing on their heads.

Smitten with the region's untarnished beauty, we came back. And on one of those subsequent visits, the die was cast. An elderly couple with grandiloquent names were happy to find a buyer for their piece of land at the head of the valley a mile outside the village. Happy to sell, but sad to see it go: from this land, Guadalupe and her husband had fed a whole family. "The soil's so good, you won't even find a stone to throw at a bird," she told me.



Paul Richardson, hard at work in the fields near his house © Santiago Camus



A rare variety of local chicken and . . .



... a dog on the wall of Richardson's home © Linda Griffiths

From the outset I understood that Extremadura might not be the easiest place in which to live. Public transport was rotten: a rickety train ran four times a day to Madrid. The region had no airport worth mentioning. Yet after the claustrophobia of island living, I relished the freedom of long drives on empty motorways. Lisbon was four hours away, Seville five, Bilbao six.

So we installed ourselves in the village, knuckled down and set about de-wilding our land, repairing water tanks, rebuilding stone walls, slashing and burning the morass of brambles that had covered the olive grove completely. We built a tiny stone house in the woods, then a much larger one with a wine cellar and a storeroom for our home-cured hams, our vats of olive oil, our jams and preserves.

For a same-sex couple with no previous connection to the area, the process of integration into this rough-and-tumble farming community was occasionally fraught. In the early days, we endured homophobic graffiti — “gays out” was scrawled on the car — and curious or quizzical stares.



My adopted home is certainly no earthly paradise. Unemployment is rife and there is little economy to speak of beyond cash-in-hand for odd jobs, both factors leading to chronic depopulation. Climate-driven wildfires are ever more frequent and ferocious.

Yet Extremadura's historic cities are monumental symphonies in stone and its traditional fiestas are thrillingly archaic. The town of Guadalupe, whose eponymous Virgin is the patroness of Extremadura, Mexico and much of Latin America besides, is worth the journey for Francisco de Zurbarán's luminous portraits of Hieronymite monks in the sacristy of the monastery church — collectively perhaps the region's most important artistic treasure.

Contemporary culture is thin on the ground, but there are notable exceptions: the festival of classical theatre held every summer in the Roman theatre at Mérida and the spectacular new art museum in Cáceres built to house the world-class haul of German/Spanish collector Helga de Alvear.

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And this has turned out to be a fine place for our back-to-the-land project to grow and prosper. Traditionally worked by peasant farmers without recourse to chemical pesticides and herbicides, our land — despite the climate crisis — is still in good ecological health. Just as importantly, in a place where land-based living is the norm, there are still people around to pass on their wisdom. From my neighbours I've learnt how to manage a vegetable garden, how to prune fruit trees and grape vines, and the complex arts of the annual *matanza* (pig slaughter) — part of a rich pork-based culture including, at the apex of quality, Extremadura's sublime acorn-fed *ibérico* hams.

After nearly a quarter-century of life in Spain's deep country, what's changed? At a personal level, we are now self-sufficient not only for water, light and heat (natural springs, solar power and firewood from our managed woodlands see to that), but we also have few outgoings beside farm machinery, animal feed and store-cupboard staples.

And my lover is now my husband. When, in June 2010, we were married in the town hall, the whole village turned out to throw confetti, and I'm now stopped in the street by elderly ladies sweetly asking after *tu marido*. In fact, the mayor of my village is himself openly gay. Nowhere in Europe is now so archaic, so backward, that it can resist the powerful undertow of modernity.



In the streets of Hoyos © Alamy

As for Extremadura, a small influx of independent travellers are finding their way here — perhaps feeling the sense of adventure, the excitement of discovery, that I first felt all those years ago.

If the region has no very clear brand identity, it's partly thanks to the diversity of its climate, landscape and culture. The rolling plains of the south, where Extremadura bumps up against Andalucía, have something of that region's smiling charm, with a dazzle of whitewash in pretty towns such as Jerez de los Caballeros and Zafra (not for nothing is the latter nicknamed "Sevilla la chica": "little Seville").

The north, by contrast, is mountainous and well-watered, with lofty peaks rising to 2400 metres. Northern counties such as Las Hurdes, the subject of Luis Buñuel's 1933 documentary *Land Without Bread*, and luscious La Vera, site of the Emperor Carlos V's monastery-retirement home at Yuste, are best enjoyed in springtime when snowmelt thunders through deep *gargantas* (gorges).



Jerez de los Caballeros, Extremadura, Spain © Alamy



The church of San Francisco Javier in Cáceres © Getty Images

For even more than culture, what Extremadura offers is natural beauty and biodiversity in spades. Latterly, I've noted among my adopted *extremeño* neighbours a kind of astonished pride that foreigners will pay good money to gaze at something that previously had little value for them: the region's woods and waters, its peaks and lowlands — a third of which are now protected under Spanish or European law.

The astonishing variety of bird species to be observed in the National Park of Monfragüe (including vultures, imperial eagles, and the rare black stork) has kick-started a trend in ornithological tourism, attracting twitchers from the UK, Netherlands and Germany. Trekking and other adventure-based holidays are rapidly taking off. Tourism of the low-key, high-earning sort is finally making its mark, attracted by the natural advantages of a region that has been bypassed by both the construction boom of the 1990s and the mass-tourism boom of the early 21st century.

My own lightbulb moment came just as the pandemic rolled in. On March 14, 2020 the Spanish government declared a state of emergency. Life in the cities ground to a halt, but here in our hidden valley it was business as usual. Reports of basic supplies running low failed to worry us: we had our own flour, our homegrown veg, a freezer full of food. Though officially locked down, we roamed maskless and free over our seven hectares of farmland and oakwoods. If the past 20 years had held moments of doubt and insecurity, it was now that I knew, with a blazing certainty, that my blind leap into wild western Spain had been a good move.

Paul Richardson's new book ['Hidden Valley: Finding Freedom in Spain's Deep Country'](#) is published by Abacus (£20)

Five places to stay in Extremadura



A cottage at the Casas del Naval, outside Villanueva de la Vera

Habitat La Cigüeña Negra

Owned by the March family from Ibiza, this stylish new country hotel in remote Sierra de Gata forms part of a 220-hectare estate producing fine olive oil and heritage-breed beef (both of which are served at the in-house restaurant).

habitatcn.com

Atrio Restaurante Hotel

Toño Perez and José Polo's exquisite restaurant-with-rooms occupies a stone palace at the heart of the medieval old town in Cáceres. Recently awarded a third Michelin star, Atrio restaurant is by some way Extremadura's best. The couple's newest enterprise Casa Paredes, opened last November in another old-town *palacio*, has 12 suites decorated with blue-chip contemporary art and Scandinavian furniture. restauranteatrío.com

Hotel Palacio Carvajal-Girón

Charming, pocket-sized Plasencia is the historic capital of northern Extremadura. This comfortable hotel in the grandly austere surroundings of a 16th-century *palacio* stands within a few steps of the city's two cathedrals, the "Old" (Romanesque) and the "New" (Gothic/Renaissance). palaciocarvajalgiron.com

Finca al-Manzil

Rural bliss meets a crisp modern sensibility at this *casa rural* where the hosts are an Austrian and an Englishwoman. It sits in verdant countryside beside the hilltop town of Montánchez. finca-al-manzil.com

Casas del Naval

Cheerfully mixing antique pieces with contemporary furnishings, garden designer Jesús Moraimé's chic lodging in three self-contained cottages on his 44-hectare country estate outside Villanueva de la Vera gives a nod to Provence and a wink to rural England. casasdelnaval.com



Dining at the Atrio Restaurante Hotel in Cáceres

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