



Bed and desayuno

Joanna Styles on running a B&B in Spain



Spain is the world's second-favourite tourist destination and although the vast majority of the visitors (over 53 million annually) flock to the *costas* and islands, more and more are discovering the Spain beyond the beaches. The sun and sand formula has lost a little of its sparkle and since you can guarantee good summers practically everywhere in Spain, foreigners and Spaniards are setting their sights away from the crowds (and the jellyfish) to the lesser-known delights of rural Spain.

Although well-established in many other European countries – B&Bs are after all a British institution – the idea of staying at a hotel in a remote part of the Spanish countryside with breakfast thrown in is a relatively new phenomena. Country B&Bs were virtually unheard of before 2000, but at the turn of the century, rural tourism was born in Spain and since then, its popularity has increased annually – figures for 2007 show a rise of nearly 10% with over 2.66 million visitors staying at rural accommodation.

The latest available statistics for 2008 reveal a small blip in rural tourism – at the end of November, annual visitors were down 1.7%, a figure that mirrors the slight decrease in Spanish tourism generally. Asturias, Cantabria, Catalunya and Galicia have been at the forefront of rural B&Bs from the very beginning, but a look at the regional statistics shows some surprising up-and-coming areas for rural tourism. The traditionally remote region of Aragón saw an increase of over 26% in visitors in 2008, perhaps on the back of the highly-successful EXPO Zaragoza. Other rising stars in 2008 were Castilla la-Mancha (up over 8%) and perhaps most surprisingly of all, the Canaries whose volcanic interiors attracted 7% more rural visitors last year.

Rural tourism is a fast-growing industry and investing in a rural accommodation business is one of the main reasons foreigners buy property in the Spanish countryside. Many set up a rural B&B (known as an *hotel rural*) and run their investment as a business concern. But while the notion of running a B&B may

be romantic – it's easy to dream of vibrant bougainvillea round the door, fresh juice for breakfast squeezed from oranges you've just picked from the garden – the realities of running a rural hotel are often quite the opposite.

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For a start, it's a major exercise in paperwork and before you choose your property, your first step should be to visit the right authorities

property

to find out what the requirements are for a rural hotel and whether you're likely to get a licence. Licences are awarded by the regional authorities and although regulations are broadly similar in the 17 autonomous regions, they are by no means the same.

As you would expect in Spain, the rules and regulations for setting up a B&B are complex and lengthy, and cover everything from the exact permitted situation of a B&B to the number of power points in the bedrooms. The good news is that the regulations are easily available – they're usually published online (on the *Consejería de Turismo* pages within regional government sites) and/or available directly from the regional tourist authority.

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As well as coming with reams of paperwork, buying a B&B is a major investment, although rural properties are invariably cheaper than their resort or city counterparts and you can buy far more for your money. If you're the sort who relishes a DIY challenge, ruins or



properties needing plenty of TLC are on the market from €50,000. But before you get carried away by the bargain, don't forget to factor in restoration costs, often at least double the initial investment. Otherwise, expect to pay at least €100,000 for a property with enough bedrooms, bathrooms and living space for a B&B. Experts recommend you have at least five bedrooms if you want to make a living from your B&B, two or three if it's an additional source of income.

An easier option is to buy an up-and-running concern. These are on the market for over €200,000 – for example, €210,000 buys a large rural hotel with cave (about as unusual as they come in B&B features) in a village in Toledo, situated in one of Spain's rural tourism star performers, Castilla la-Mancha. Slightly dearer at €240,000 is a typical Canary country property near Garachico on Gran Canaria, a far cry from a similarly priced 2-bedroom apartment in one of the island's beach resorts.

Once you've earmarked your property, the hard work really begins. Many underestimate the task ahead and overestimate the earning potential. Those who have been there and done it usually recommend you have a year's income available to tide you over while the business establishes itself. However, successful veterans in the business also cite the immense satisfaction of a business well run and the opportunity to live in one of the Spain's many exceptionally beautiful spots and make a living from it.

Rating system

B&Bs are rated usually from one to five, similar to the hotel star system, but with regional variations. For example, Castilla la Mancha uses a sun symbol, Asturias a Celtic emblem called the *trísquel* and the Canary Islands palm trees.

Useful tips

- Don't embark on a B&B adventure if you aren't 100 per cent sure you enjoy the hospitality business.
- Do your maths and establish a realistic business plan.
- Take expert advice on setting up and make the most of resources provided by the regional tourist authority.
- Buy a special property in a special location.
- Learn to speak Spanish – you need it not just to understand the paperwork but also to cater for the main market, the Spanish.
- Offer the best you can afford in furnishings and décor.
- Provide value for money and don't forget special offers – this is a hugely competitive market.
- Provide accommodation that's so good guests will want to return.

