

**M**AURA DUNNE and her husband Pat made the move to Spain in 2003 and now run the highly respected and successful independent property locating service [www.ads-property.co.uk](http://www.ads-property.co.uk). They are based in the Mazarrón Bay of the Costa Cálida in the region of Murcia. I wondered what it is that makes them love their adopted home and lifestyle in the Mediterranean sunshine.

“Living and working in this wonderful part of Spain is certainly different to our old corporate lifestyles back in the UK. None of that being in the office nine to five with those depressing, dark, miserable drives to the office and back home in winter.” said Maura. “We don’t even wear our watches anymore.”

The region has had spectacular growth over the past five or six years and I asked whether this had altered the feel of the place. Maura had done some sums, “We live in an area which has about 70% Spanish residents and the rest are northern Europeans, South Americans and Moroccans. This mix gives the area a really cosmopolitan feel but it’s managed to hang on to its Spanish charm. Puerto de Mazarrón is a working fishing port with fresh catches landed twice a day, as you can imagine, there’s a lot of lovely fresh fish on the local menus.”

Being essentially still quite Spanish must mean it takes a bit of getting used to after the UK. Maura laughs now about it but in the early days there was a bit of a culture shock. “When we were first here it was so frustrating going into town in the early afternoon to do business only to find everything closed down for siesta.” And the notorious Spanish red tape? Maura sees this more of a linguistic problem than anything. “The



Murcia Cathedral

Thinking of packing your bags, leaving the wintry UK weather behind and moving to a sunnier climate? **Hermione Summerville** meets a couple that did just that

bureaucracy really seems hard to deal with at first, but once you begin to understand the language you realise that it is no worse than back in the UK or Ireland.”

Pat and Maura had made the move not only to enjoy Spain but also to set up in business, which must have had its own challenges. Maura agreed, “You are dead right there. The best thing you can do is get yourself a good lawyer and accountant who’ll guide you through the mountains of paperwork needed in order to make everything legal. Treat people how you expect to be treated yourself and if offering a professional and reliable service is important to you, then continuing with

# Murcia

## We love it!

these key business ethics will pay dividends in the long term.”

How difficult is it to just arrive and become part of a new community I asked the couple. Maura was adamant about Spanish. “Learning the language is a must if you intend to settle down here. I suppose I’m practically fluent now but you are always learning. I go to a group for conversation practice every week. The group is made up of Spanish residents and foreigners and we speak a mixture of Spanish and English.

Everyone is welcome, it’s free, it’s good fun and we talk about all sorts of things. It’s a great way to meet the locals and to get to know more about the area we live in and Spanish culture in general. They’re keen to find out all about our culture and traditions as well.

The locals are really friendly and welcoming. We live in a village, Isla Plana, just outside Puerto de Mazarrón. It’s a typical Spanish village with everything one needs for day to day living and it’s only a 5-minute drive to Puerto de Mazarrón or



Paella

45 minutes stroll along the coast for those who like a scenic walk. It is nice to live in an area where people still stop to pass the time of day on the street and where family values are still high on the agenda. It is lovely to see family groups having lunch in the local restaurants especially on Sundays and Fiesta days. Sundays is very much a family day, whether you see the families sharing *churros* and chocolate for breakfast or meeting at lunch time for a long drawn out lunch of *paella*.

#### Family values

The fiestas days are fantastic, the people put so much into them, and the council provide all sorts of freebies from wood to build your barbeque on the street to free beer, free paella and free concerts. The Spanish love their fiestas and go all out to enjoy themselves. The time and effort put into the costumes, the music, the floats etc is astounding. There are so many festivals to choose from but one that stands out is the annual carnival at Águilas, it

is up their with the best of them. Rio, watch out!” laughed Maura.

#### Three airports

Over the past few years the infrastructure in Murcia has improved dramatically and continues to be upgraded with new roads and motorways opening up the area to other parts of Spain and beyond. Maura listed the transport options: “We’ve got three international airports within easy reach. Murcia (San Javier) is 40 minute drive and both Alicante and Almería are only an hour and a half away.” And the mysterious new airport that never seems to open? Maura smiled, “Work has actually started on Corvera International Airport near Murcia, the city that is, and when it’s finished in a couple of years it’ll be about 40 minutes drive too.”



Pat and Maura

What about trying to find work if you do not set up your own business or if you do not speak Spanish? “There are a quite a few businesses run by British folk and they are looking for staff from time to time. If you want to integrate though, learn the language and apply for a job in a Spanish company; one that offers a service to English speakers and you can get the best of both worlds.”

The port at Mazarron





Carnival at Águilas



Monastery Sierra Espuña



Sierra Nevada

**GETTING AWAY**

**Spoilt for choice as they seem to be in their wonderful Mediterranean paradise. I wondered if they ever left the place**

Maura admitted that they could sometimes leave this idyll on Spain's warm coast. "For longer trips we sometimes visit our favourite city Madrid, only four and a half hours by train from Cartagena. Whatever you do, be sure to travel first class. The prices are great value *and* include meals and drinks.

Another of our favourites is Granada just 3 hours drive with its amazing Alhambra Palace; always book in advance for your visit to the Palace to avoid the queues; this can easily be done on the internet. If we visit Granada in winter then we go Skiing in the Sierra Nevada just 30 minutes drive from the city. How about a sunny 20 degrees in the morning in Puerto de Mazarrón and by lunch time you can be skiing in Sierra Nevada (minus 3 degrees) - how's that for diversity?

Valencia is another favourite of ours and is only just over 3 hours drive, this city is great for a weekend break. Visit in March for the annual Fallas Fiesta but beware this is one festival, which makes excessive noise with fireworks both day and night. The fiesta lasts for a week and the city is a riot of colour with millions of flowers and fireworks.

Other pluses? "The health care service in Spain in our view is second to none, the price of prescriptions is lower than the UK, and the speed of the service offered both by the local health centres and the hospitals is first class. A lot of treatments are offered free on the health service that even those with private health care in the UK have to pay a surcharge for. There's a new health centre opening here in Puerto de Mazarrón at the end of this year and a new hospital under construction in nearby Cartagena. Dental and optical services are also cheaper here.

Having integrated into the village and set up a successful business I asked what they did in their spare time, assuming they had some. "We're spoilt for choice with things to do. There's something for everyone. We have loads of beautiful beaches, lots with a Blue Flag award. Even in the high season when we have all the Spanish tourists from Madrid and northern Spain you can still find a secluded beach for a picnic or snorkelling. The new marina in Puerto de Mazarrón has brought in new investment as



Roman theatre, Cartagena

well as some beautiful floating palaces. There are plenty of water sports including diving, waterskiing, snorkelling, boat hire and Jet Ski bikes. In the high season part of the main beach is reserved for senior citizens and other areas are reserved for sport and children, something for everyone. The beaches are well maintained being cleaned every day.

### Back to nature

If you are not a beach person but enjoy nature then there are many walks available in the local mountain ranges and *ramblas* (dry river beds). A visit to the Sierra Espuña national park is a must. It is only 35 minutes drive and there is some beautiful scenery and flora and fauna. The park is famous for its wild boar and eagles. Sometime you see a wild boar coming down to the restaurants in the park for tit bits after lunch has been served. When visiting the park be sure to visit the monastery of St Eulalia on the edge of the park. It has now been converted into a hotel. Be sure to visit the church here and also the vast gardens. Try the tapas in the café bar or lunch in the restaurant. Another place well worth a visit is the medieval village of Aledo just a couple of kilometres up the road with its medieval castle and church.

I asked about different customs and Maura mentioned the different way of eating, “Trying

the tapas is always a bit of a laugh when you first arrive and you don't know what is in each dish which is beautifully displayed on the counters in most bars; selection is by pointing and working out what is in it is by taste. Some you like, some you don't, but at €1 to €1.50 per plate, it's no big deal if you've chosen something you don't like.” And the local wine? “Wine lovers need to head for Jumilla in the north east or Bullas in the north west to do a bit of wine tasting and then put a case or two in the boot.”

### City life

Away from the beaches though there are more delights, “We also all these fabulous cities that are perfect for a day trip. You've got the old city of Cartagena with its old restored Roman amphitheatre, castle and museums. Murcia with its exquisite cathedral containing 27 chapels. Wander around the winding alleyways and discover loads of tapas bars. It really is foodie heaven.

Caravaca de la Cruz in north west Murcia is also well worth a visit to see the famous double crucifix or to visit during its famous festival “the running of the wine horses”. Caravaca is one of seven holy cities in the world and is visited by many pilgrims each year. Archena and Fortuna just north of Murcia City are famous for their spas and can also be visited on a day trip. The

areas around the Mar Menor are also famous for their spas and healing baths.

If golf is your game, you will be spoilt for choice; according to the professionals this part of Spain has a number of the best golf courses in Europe. With reasonable green fees, good weather, challenging courses and low cost airlines, what more can you ask for?”

Maura has a keen interest in photography and never leaves home without her camera; she'd even brought it to the prom where she must have walked thousands of times before. She explained, “The scenery changes from day to day, the views are stunning and a true professional doesn't want to miss the opportunity of yet another photograph... One for the album, Gromit”

Shopping centres have now arrived in Spain in style. “We've got three fabulous new shopping centres in Murcia, just outside the city with the traditional bespoke designer shops in the centre of the city. Cartagena is not to be beaten by the capital Murcia; it also has two lovely new shopping centres, so if you are still hankering after C&A, Zara and Primark, they're all here waiting for you!”

### Relaxed lifestyle

Away from the hustle of the shopping centre though things seem all so relaxed in this corner of the world. “Living in our new adopted home has certainly changed our lifestyle for the better. Everything is so laid back and more enjoyable. In Mazarrón we've a microclimate and on average 320 days of sunshine each year. No “SAD syndrome” here. We can still have a 4 course *Menu del Día* lunch for about €8 including drinks. On the whole the cost of living here is about a third cheaper than in the UK and Ireland. The climate here and the Mediterranean diet give us a healthier lifestyle.”

It all sounds too good to be true I muse. So what are the disadvantages of living full time in Spain? This is when Maura goes all quiet, which is highly unusual for her. She stumbles and eventually comes up with “I miss the daffodils in spring, the autumn colour and falling leaves and I still haven't got it clear in my head when the next bank holiday is due”. She goes on to explain that they get 16 national bank holidays a year, plus many local and regional bank holidays! What a life!

Dare I ask, would they return to the UK or Ireland again? “Not in a million years!” the answer comes back loud and clear. ■

### ■ FURTHER INFORMATION

If you are inspired by Maura and Pat's story why not visit the area and check it out for yourself. The area is served by all the low cost airlines and there are many bargain flights still to be had. Hotel accommodation is reasonably priced and there is lots of self catering accommodation available. If you are thinking of moving to the area check out their website [www.ads-property.co.uk](http://www.ads-property.co.uk)

