

English newspapers warn their compatriots not to buy houses in Almeria

The Times and the BBC network publish reports about 4000 British people "swindled" in the Almanzora
Translated from original article by Q.Chirino Y.M.V.Cobo Albox, IDEAL, 25 November 2007

It is night and the car seems like a doll in the middle of the countryside. There isn't a bit of light and the roads don't exist, only tracks created by the passage of vehicles.

"More slowly, more slowly" pleads our guide David (who does not speak or understand Spanish) as we bounce up the road to his house.

The setting is the outskirts of Albox, a town of about 11,000 inhabitants. As far as the eye can see in the moonlight are hundreds of illegal houses crowded between hills and fallow fields. In Albox alone there must be 500 and in all of the valley of Almanzora there must be thousands. Some estimates speak of 4,000 and others 6,000, echoing the last Memoria of the Fiscalía de Medio Ambiente (Public Prosecutor) of the Superior Court of Justice of Andalucia.

500 English families live in Albox. Maybe because it is the middle of the night and one cannot measure the true scale but, the panorama is discouraging. It is inexplicable that this situation has come about without anybody doing anything to avoid it. David recounts that many houses have neither light nor water.

A group of compatriots have formed the association 'Abusos Urbanistica Almanzora No' which consists of 400 residents. Except for one German the rest are all English. "We need more, we are not enough" explains Bob Preston, their spokesman.

They feel like victims of a swindle. Some knew the Costa Almeria. Others only wanted a sunny location for their retirement. So they began to search outward from the border with France for a suitable location at a reasonable price. They arrived at the Almerian coast but the houses were too expensive. Several property developers, that they do not want to name, led them inland. "We were excited. Here the weather is very good and we could live in the middle of nature" explains David. What happened next was very quick. They gave a 5% deposit and in less than one year the houses were complete. "They built the tiled roof before completing the walls so that we paid the total more quickly. Without escritura or anything". For them "A rustic house is a house in the countryside, not a place that cannot be urbanised".

David explains that in some cases they only bought land and the same company built the villas for them. Many of these companies disappeared after being paid. But still English newspapers have advertisements for idyllic houses in this corner of Almeria.

The pain in Spain

Life in Almeria has become a trial. "We don't know if they are going to knock down the houses tomorrow" they exclaim. Leading British media have picked up on the case and have published extensive news articles. "Pensioners pain in Spain" headlines The Times. The BBC network has also transmitted a documentary about its compatriots in Albox.

In the reporting 'fraud' is spoken of and Britains are warned to be careful before coming to the Peninsula and in particular to Almeria. "The blight affects at least 4,000 properties in the Almanzora valley in Almería, southeast Spain", reports The Times in its edition of 2 November. "I sold up to enjoy a quiet retirement here but the Spanish have stuffed me and thousands like me. We could lose our life savings and our homes, because most of us don't legally own anything," said Bob Preston in the article.

Mediation of the EU

The labyrinth of illegal houses in the valley of the Almanzora is problematic for the administration. For the property owners and the town councils the easiest solution would be to legalise everything. But, it is no so simple. Someone has to assume the high cost of urbanising what was until recently a potatoe field : sewage, roads, services...

Already there are at least 11 sentences via contentious administrative routes ordering the demoliton of illegal constructions. None have been executed. Even the Town councils themselves are trying to avoid demolishing the houses.

The problem has even forced the EU to intervene. A comission, lead by the Pole Martin Pole Marin Libick and the deputy British Labour Party member Michael Cashman, visited Albox last March. The EU confirmed that the situation is a disaster but exonerated the owners. The Times has christened the Spanish adventure a pain. This is what we call getting good press.