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Fortune blows on Spain's windy city

Tarifa has long been a draw for hippies, but now that the smart set has put it on the map, demand for property is exploding — along with prices, says Mark Stucklin



Tell them it's a windy dump, that everyone is uptight and you can't find a property for love or money." From Adrienne Gabriel's smile, it's obvious she is joking. "Actually, life here is so good that sometimes we fret about the impact of more newcomers, of word getting out," she explains.

Gabriel, 42, originally from South Africa, moved to Tarifa from Malibu 18 months ago with her British husband, Nick, and children Grace, 3, Alexa, 7, and Sasha, 9. The family upped sticks when Nick, 42, was headhunted by an internet company based in nearby Gibraltar. "For the kids, it was total submersion. We put them in a local school and they were speaking fluent Spanish within four months," says Gabriel.

Tarifa is the southernmost town in Spain, and the views of Morocco, just across the Straits of Gibraltar, are spectacular. For Gabriel, who has also lived in Wandsworth, south London, proximity to the continent of her birth is appealing: "We are just 35 minutes by boat from Africa, so we can go across to Morocco for lunch."

The only problem — and it's a big one — is an acute shortage of properties for sale in and around Tarifa. "We've been househunting for a year now, but there is so little on the market and the prices are insane," explains Gabriel.

Even with a €1m (£685,000) budget, the Gabriels have been unable to find a detached property in a semi-rural residential area that matches their requirements. "Five years ago, the three- and four-bed properties we are looking at might have cost a few hundred thousand euros; now they start at a million," says Gabriel.

Frustrating as it is for would-be buyers like the Gabriels, the reason is obvious: in recent years, there has been very little new construction in the town, pending the approval of a new urban plan. But while developers have held back, demand for property has exploded, driven by a radical transformation in the town's fortunes.

Once part of the hippy trail, Tarifa spent decades in the doldrums, with little local industry and beach tourism driven away by the strong winds that blow through the straits. Consequently, there was no demand for new homes, while the ancient buildings and walls of its old quarter were left to crumble.

Over time a windsurfing community put down roots, attracted by the very winds that discouraged tourists. Fantastic windsurfing, and then kitesurfing, put the town on the map as a place where surfer dude meets hippy glam.

The result is that Tarifa is now achingly cool, full of beautiful people with athletic, tanned bodies. Dreadlocks and designer brands abound, and the place even has its own style of music — a rhythmic, exotic blend of Arab, ethnic and flamenco. The only other place in Spain that can compete with it for this kind of happening, young, affluent scene is Ibiza.

Tarifa's youthful niche appeal has attracted property buyers who feel comfortable in this environment, and who don't mind the wind. While other Spanish coasts attract fiftysomething British couples looking for a place in the sun to make their pensions go further, the area attracts younger couples.

Georgie and Lawrence Bull moved three years ago from Rye, East Sussex. Both keen windsurfers, they met at

Rye Watersports, a windsurfing centre. "Lawrence came to Tarifa years ago to windsurf, and fell in love with the place," explains Georgie, 32.

The Bulls, who relocated with their children Sam, now 11, Oliver, 9, and Maisy, 5, and have just had a fourth baby, Lilia, started off by renting a finca, or country property. "But it was very basic, and too cold and wet in the winter, so we moved into rented accommodation in town," says Georgie.

In 2004, they found a corner building in the attractive old quarter, which they bought for £340,000. "Fortunately, the building was already largely refurbished, so we didn't have to undertake much building work," explains Georgie.

Located just inside the city walls, on a street leading directly down from the beautiful old Moorish gate known as the Puerta de Jerez, the building has three floors plus a roof terrace, with views of the old town and the sea. On the ground floor, Georgie has opened Tarifa's first organic shop, selling her own brand of natural and organic skincare products called Tarifa Green.

"It's a great place to live," she says. "The downside of living in the old quarter is the noise and the problems with parking, but you get used to it."

Beth Harrison, 34, and her French- Norwegian husband, Arvid Bergvall, 36, moved to Tarifa from London three years ago. The couple have since had two children, Amélie, two, and Léa, five months.

After making several local real-estate investments, Harrison and Bergvall set up Vision Tarifa, a property consultancy specialising in well built, design-led properties. They provide an advisory service to investors, and they also rent out some unique properties around the area. Their business gives them an understanding of the forces driving the local market.

"You can't go wrong with the old town," says Bergvall, who trained as a solicitor in London. "There's no solution to the shortage of attractive, historic properties within the city walls. Tarifa is now so popular, and so unique, that demand for this type of property will always be greater than supply."

According to Cristina Aldana, an estate agent with Inmotarifa, property prices in the old town are three to four times higher than they were just five years ago, and demand from British buyers is partly responsible. A typical two-bedroom, 80sq m flat costs about £165,000, up from £90,000 two years ago.

Outside the old town there are some drab, modern districts spreading a couple of miles west down the beach. Many of the properties here are holiday flats, and prices are high. According to Aldana, a one-bed flat on the last remaining new development by the beach, La Reserva de Los Lances, costs £245,000; a two-bed is £275,000. "Despite the prices, it's almost all sold out," she says.

For those, like the Gabriels, who prefer to live out of town, the options are limited. Agricultural land and the park of Los Alcornocales surround the town, so there are few residential areas. Beautiful natural surroundings — wind farms notwithstanding — are a great attraction, but the lack of new residential development causes problems.

For detached properties out of town, the most desirable area is La Peña, a five-minute drive west of Tarifa, halfway down the magnificent Los Lances beach. "It's slightly elevated here, with great views over the beach towards Morocco," says Bergvall. "Yes, prices are high, but they compare favourably with places such as Ibiza." Detached properties in La Peña range from about £545,000 to £1.025m.

The problem is that many of the properties around La Peña don't have planning permission. Until a few years ago, it was quite normal to build properties here without permission, but there has been an Andalusia-wide clampdown on illegal building. The clampdown has increased the risks of buying illegal properties.

Fortunately for future buyers, the new urban plan is expected to reclassify as residential some land around La Peña, and along the beach towards the town. Plans even include a golf-course development, though golf is not what Tarifa is about.

"Everything is on standby until the new urban plan is approved," explains Bergvall. "The plan is expected to legalise many of the properties in La Peña, and make more land available for development, to address pent-up demand."

In the meantime, househunters like the Gabriels will have to pay the high prices and accept the risks, or sit tight until more properties are built. But hoping that Tarifa might return to obscurity is unlikely to do the trick. The word is out.

On the market

At El Cuarton, a 10-minute drive from Tarifa, this three-bedroom country house with a swimming pool is for sale for £395,000. Inmotarifa, 00 34 615 979 316, www.inmotarifa.com

Close to the centre of Tarifa, a four-bedroom, two bathroom townhouse built in 1999 is on the market with Inmotarifa (00 34 615 979 316, www.inmotarifa.com) for £245,650

Between the beach and the town centre, this three-bed townhouse, set around a courtyard, is for sale fully furnished for £228,000. Tarifa Direct, 00 34 956 627 389, www.tarifadirect.com

A two-bedroom, one- bathroom beach apartment in Tarifa, with a terrace and sea views, is for sale for £203,000 with Tarifa Direct, 00 34 956 627 389, www.tarifadirect.com

Tarifa Green, 00 34 956 680 339, www.tarifagreen.com; Vision Tarifa, www.visiontarifa.com

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