

q travel: with BARRIE MAHONEY

'Tweeters from the Atlantic'

Barrie Mahoney was a head teacher and school inspector in the UK, as well as a reporter in Spain, before moving to the Canary Islands to launch and edit a new English language newspaper. He enjoys life in the sun as a columnist and author, and continues to write a series of popular novels and books for those living and working in the sun.



Whistle While We Work

I am often asked which of the eight inhabited Canary Islands I like best of all. I can never answer the question, because each island is different and beautiful in its own unique way. I make a point of visiting each of the islands over the year. I love them all; each have their own unique character, culture and traditions. Let me give just one example.

One of the smallest Canary Islands is La Gomera, which is currently much favoured by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. No doubt, she, like so many others, relish the peace and tranquillity of this island paradise. One of the elements of La Gomera is that it retains its own unique language, a whistled language called 'Silbo Gomero' (The Gomera Whistle).

'Silbo Gomero' is not a pointless academic exercise that the teaching of Latin is often accused of, but a true form of communication that is often used today. I recall hearing it in practical use during one of my many visits to the island. My hotel was next to a construction site, and builders were using this whistled form of communication to request additional materials, help and to give directions during the construction of a property. Its piercing shrill was unlike anything that I had heard before and I was impressed with the ease and fluency with which it was used.

La Gomera's ancient whistling language was used by farmers and shepherds to communicate across La Gomera's many large ravines. It is a language that consists of just two vowels and four consonants, yet the whistler is able to articulate words and phrases in Spanish or any other language.

Many believe that the language was first used by the Guanche inhabitants well before the conquest of the islands by Spain in the Fifteenth Century. Linguists regard the language with considerable interest, and some experts claim that it should be taught in general linguistics courses, because it demonstrates practically how a natural language is formed and organised.

Although 'Silbo Gomero' now has the status of being a UNESCO recognised form of communication, it was seriously in danger of dying out completely in the 1990s simply because children at school were told not to use the language, because "it made them sound like peasants." In 1999, it began to be taught in schools once again in an effort to revitalise the language. This approach has been very successful and the regional Government is now considering offering courses on the language that will be taught by qualified teachers across all the islands.

Since its introduction into the education system twenty years ago, the status of the language has greatly improved. In La Gomera, it is currently taught for 30 minutes each week in primary schools, as well as the first two years of middle schools. The possibility of courses in the language being extended across all the Canary Islands is currently being considered. Whatever the decision, it is important to maintain and extend the use and understanding of 'Silbo Gomero' for cultural, as well as linguistic reasons. As with any language, the approach should be to learn to love the language and not to impose it.

If you enjoyed this article, take a look at Barrie's websites: <http://barriemahoney.com> and <http://thecanaryislander.com> or read his latest book, 'Letters from the Canary Islands and Spain' (ISBN: 9780995602731).

Available in paperback from Amazon, Waterstones and all good bookshops, as well as Kindle editions.

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