

# 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 expats.



## Living in Caves

"Top 20 Caves to Rent in the Canary Islands" screams one advertisement, followed by "Hundreds of Cave Homes to Buy in the Canary Islands" shouts another. Well, I guess it all makes good copy, but is living in a cave just another symptom of 'reverse one-upmanship', and something to brag about to colleagues at work? "Oh, I'm just off to the cave for the weekend."

During the Spanish conquest of the Canary Islands, the native aborigines, the Guanches, were considered to be living at a primitive level by European standards. The Guanches wore animal skins for clothing, made stone tools for hunting and lived in caves. Well, if that's not primitive, what is? It is strange how with the passage of time, reverting back to cave dwelling is seen as 'cool' (in more ways than one) and is now a highly desirable form of accommodation for some.

A few weeks ago, we visited a friend whom we have known for many years. He bought a group of caves in the Canary Islands before it became fashionable and at a knock down price too. He and his family were not living in exactly slum-like conditions, since our friend's caves were well equipped with all modern conveniences. There is running water and mains electricity, although many cave dwellers prefer to rely upon their own solar installations, since it gives them a feeling of self-sufficiency. Beautifully designed bedrooms, fitted kitchen, sauna and games room would put most homes to shame, with the added benefits of fast Internet connection and cable television. Our friend's home included a patio and delightful, well-stocked garden crammed full with unusual and native plants.

There are many such cave homes throughout the Canary Islands, with the most villages made up of cave homes located in Gran Canaria, where the excavation of cave homes into the mountain side remains a feature of the natural landscape. One of the most appealing features of cave homes is that it is unlikely that air-conditioning in summer and heating in winter are needed, since they remain at a steady temperature throughout the year. How's that for energy efficiency?

Visitors to the Agüimes municipality in Gran Canaria will also find some of the best preserved cave dwellings on the island in the Guayadeque ravine. There are several cave restaurants and even a cave church that is open to visitors, which may help visitors to appreciate the sense of coolness and atmosphere of cave dwellings.

If we now hop over to another of the Canary Islands, Lanzarote, visitors will discover a cave home in the middle of a remote lava field. This was the dream home of the renowned artist, César Manrique who utilised the simple idea of living in five volcanic chambers. This is not an ordinary home, but one lovingly created by a man who had the vision to develop Lanzarote's unique volcanic landscape into an ecologically friendly dwelling. It is thanks to Manrique that regulations were brought into being to restrict tourism development on the island with any structure taller than a palm tree forbidden.

Homes are not the only use for caves in Lanzarote, with a cafe built into a rock on the island's north coast and a theatre, swimming pool and nightclub built into another cave complex, which was hugely admired by Manrique as the world's most beautiful cave adaption - praise indeed.

Of course, as time goes on, modern adaptations of original cave homes distort our vision of the lives and times of these early people. As a reminder, visitors to Gran Canaria may wish to visit one of the most important archaeological sites in the Canary Islands, the Cueva Pintada (the Painted Cave), which interprets life at the time of the Guanches. The original purpose of the cave is unknown, but it is decorated with red, black and white painted geometrical shapes and may have been used as a dwelling, a sacred place or for funeral rites. This spectacular site is well worth a visit.

So, before you rush off to book your modern cave home experience with Airbnb, and yes, I have no doubt that a version of a cave home will be available on there too, do give some thought to these ancient people and the lives that the Guanches lived before the invasion by their Spanish conquerors and the genocide that was to follow. Personally, I'd rather book a nice hotel.

*If you enjoyed this article, take a look at Barrie's websites: <http://barriemahoney.com> and <http://thecanaryislander.com> or read his latest book, 'Footprints in the Sand' (ISBN: 9780995602717). Available in paperback, as well as Kindle editions.*