

OPINION

Cool heads needed

IN EARLY June it seemed likely that we were going to have a few niggling incidences in Gibraltar.

We were expecting the occasional stray fishing boat or Guardia Civil patrol crossing into Gibraltarian waters - which may have triggered protests from either Madrid or Gibraltar for a day or two, and then the whole thing would die down.

But this summer's escalating events, including the Guardia Civil shooting at a jet skier, the protests at the creation of a marine environment, the unprecedented delays at the border and now the arrival of a British warship, as well as the uncompromising messages being sent out from both Madrid and London are unprecedented.

With the burning of Gibraltar plated cars in La Linea and online death threats to Chief Minister Fabian Picardo, now is the time for cool heads as we go into the hottest part of the summer.

Keep celebs coming

IT ISN'T a secret that Marbs is the place to be, and be seen! In fact, the whole of the Costa is positively brimming with celebs. In one week alone there has been everyone from C list ex 'Apprentice' star Luisa Zissman to A list models Naomi Campbell and Kate Moss. Although it may get repetitive, reading about who was spotted in a bikini, encouraging these stars to come and spend is great for the economy. Some may say that it is only June-September that sees this influx of cash, but at least it is coming in - and we hope it continues coming.

Online Victory

WE have worked incredibly hard over the last two years to make sure that the *Olive Press* is not just seen as a printed newspaper. By ensuring original content goes up daily onto our website www.theolivepress.es - and by reflecting and reacting to big events - we have become THE key local news website for many expats around Spain.

Whether this means being the first English site to post up a video of the Galicia train crash, the only site to update the current Gibraltar situation on the hour, or just posting a quirky off-beat blogging post, we are proud of our endeavour. It is already getting us over 250,000 visitors a month and it is great news that our hard work has just been recognised in an awards ceremony for global expat sites.

To beat *The Telegraph's* popular and frequently updated site to silver and to see *Sur in English* and the *EuroWeekly News* miles out of the medals table is a real honour.

Next year we are aiming for gold!

Got a news story?

Contact our team of journalists in our Costa del Sol office on 951127006 or 691831399 or email newsdesk@theolivepress.es

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A campaigning, community newspaper, the *Olive Press* represents the huge expatriate community in southern Spain - 198,000 copies distributed monthly (130,000 digitally) with an estimated readership, including the website, of more than 500,000 people a month.

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MIDSUMMER MADNESS

Being the heart of the silly season, the Olive Press compares the life of the boss of a small 18-room boutique hotel, near Ronda (right), with the life of the boss of the Costa del Sol's biggest hotel the Sunset Beach, in Benalmadena with 1,882 guests this week and counting (below)



PALS: But Mark and Andy's hotels are like chalk and cheese



We use the 'Hoff' to remind people that going topless is for the pool and their rooms



IT'S busy at the best of times, but in August things go completely nuts at the Sunset Beach Club, the Costa del Sol's biggest hotel.

Aside from the 1,900 guests to keep happy, with 50,000 constructed square meters there are an awful lot of corridors to check... and to be exact 554 apartments.

Then I've got a team of 69 cleaners to keep the rooms spotless and to process a staggering 450,000 kilos of laundry every year!

The Food and Beverage team, all 71 of them, work tirelessly serving up a la carte dining, poolside snacks, beverages in the cocktail bar, or the beach bar, or the beach club.

As you can see, statistics are a bit of a hobby for me.

So here's another one: we

FACTFILE

Sunset Beach Club, Benalmadena
Rooms: 554
Weddings: 80-a-year
Average price per room: Winter €60; Summer €150
Manager: Mark Wardell

sell 120,000 bottles of water at the hotel.

And one more: We have 14 all smiling 'animation girls and guys' (one a pirate) whose sole purpose is to ensure all our guests have a fun packed visit.

And in reality, we are actually a self-contained village, with my ideal guest

never leaving the premises and never in need of anything.

Security and safety is our number one priority but from the moment the cleaning team

moves in at 5am to the last bar closing at 4am our real jobs are to make people happy.

And every one of the 230 staff (all but three are Spanish) play their part and in my books are the real stars.

But I, in particular, get a buzz out of meeting young couples with kids who had visited Sunset Beach back in the 1980s or 1990s (we opened in 1987) when they were kids.

The sight of wedding couples (of which we will accommodate 80 this year) making their vows, sharing their joy with friends and family, is also special.

And, of course, who can forget the groups of lads from the golf societies arriv-

ing for their tenth visit and very much up for the 'craic'. Indeed it is a close run thing, which group are the happiest... the golfing or wedding group.

Inevitably with such a pot pourri of people there are a range of unusual moments.

There are the wedding parties where relations between sides is hostile at best; the departing guests who forget their suitcases (not infrequent); the extraordinary list of lost property (how can one forget ones golf clubs!);

The irate guest (no nationality mentioned) who thinks its perfectly all right to towel reserve eight sun beds...and

let's not forget the 'Hoff' (see poster).. Displayed throughout the hotel the Hoff poster reminds people that bearing torsos is for poolside or the privacy of their room.

And the downside...well, Inevitably there are some. Holidays can be a stressful time, domestic disputes do happen, things can go wrong. Our job is to help

We have enjoyed five of the best years in the hotel's existence

'I sometimes feel like Basil Fawlty'

FACTFILE

Molino del Santo, Benaolan, near Ronda
Rooms: 18
Weddings: Five-a-year
Average price per room: €150
Manager: Andy Chapell

WE'VE done it all before. We know what happens in August – a different set of rules cut in. Timetables shift, the type of clientele changes and everyone's just, well, 'Augusted' to coin a phrase.

A few years ago we made a decision – no holidays for our staff in August. There's too much to do, the heat is sapping and the hours are late. No holidays for staff means we are as prepared as we possibly can be.

So August is different; there are more Spanish guests around with their own set of requirements, there are lots more children around getting tired and possibly irritable, but generally people are more relaxed.

But ultimately, in a small hotel the problems don't change that much. What we offer that a larger hotel may not be able to is personal attention – and that's good.

'Tickets for the Alhambra?' – 'no problem, we'll book them'. 'Train times to get there?' – 'here you are'. 'Early breakfast in a cool box for the 07.35 train?' – 'But, of course'.

Naturally, there are some who test your patience. The lovely 'mature' lady with her two small dogs staying for our longest-ever visit of, wait for it, over four weeks.

Charming, but maybe just a touch lonely. Every day all the staff are aware of how she's feeling. The heat is getting to her, the birds are singing too loudly, the food is not quite what she has at home.

We listen, we empathise, we do everything we can. After all, 65% of our guests have been before – they are our life blood.

But today she's 'gaseous!' Oh dear, oh dear. She has no transport and helplessly asks where the nearest pharmacy is. It's

in whatever way we can. A negative for us is always an opportunity to make friends and generate return custom.

The only thing we can't do is turn back the clock... So yes there are moments where one notices a regular who does not appear at his usual table or with his regular companion. We all have to face that final journey ... but at least we have played our part in creating some special memories along the way.

The good news is that over the past five years while the world around us struggled to cope with all the stresses and pains of recession we have played a part in bringing happiness to thousands of people from all parts of the globe...as a result we have enjoyed five of the best years in the hotel's existence and now look forward to even better times as the coast moves towards more better times generally.



LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT: Andy providing all round frivolity for his guests

a five minute drive, but she has no transport.

As the boss, I've got a few other issues to deal with this particular Saturday morning, but as nobody else has time perhaps I get her something for her wind. Anything in particular?

No, not really – whatever. So I hot-foot my way to the nearby village to ask the chemist's advice.

He's great – he has just the thing she needs, he tells me.

But on dashing back proudly and delivering the packet of pills, I get a stony face.

'Oh no. Not those ones. They're for vomiting' –

Maybe I should take them myself, I muse.

It turns out she needs a product that she can suddenly remember the name of – but the chemist has now closed for the weekend.

A phone call and luckily he is still there at the back in his office...Yes he'll wait if I come straight away to swap the pills and another half hour later the 'correct' ones are safely delivered.

Phew – but the plans to check mid-season cash flow and budgeting for the rest of the year have been summarily shelved

And they must wait again. For now lunch guests especially requested Magnum minis on a birthday cake for 4pm and no-one has remembered to order them.

Now who would be available to help? Oh yes, that would be me. In the car again, sashaying from shop to shop in our local village ... someone must stock Frigo products – it's got to be that brand.

Nowhere to be found, accelerator down and into Ronda 15 minutes away to the big hypermarket. Finally track them down and then wait in the 'wrong' queue behind the woman who needs to check everything. The Magnums melt before my eyes. Aaar-gghh. And I forgot to bring a cold box to keep them in so drive back with the air con on full blast hoping they will stay this side of solid.

Obviously I need to try one when I arrive back at base. Actually they're still deep frozen. Phew. Just need to brush up on the words of Happy Birthday...

At least the car started for each of these crises – as I think you can probably visualise a Basil Fawlty moment with a tree branch thrashing a lump of inert metal

We mould ourselves to the wishes of our guests most of the time. They want organic meats – we provide the option. Although it's still amazing though when people storm into our kitchen and bang their fists on the table to tell us that the organic chicken is NOT chicken – it must be cat or dog or something else to have such dark flesh.

Wedding coming up – big event for us – 40 people with expensive tastes from Cordoba.

The staff member who is co-coordinating needs time to source particular flowers – but who can cover her shift? Yes, the boss is there, knowing full well we have no-one else to step in.

It's OK though... I can at last pop into the office and catch up with paperwork.

But it's never like that of course... something always comes up... Ultimately as the owner of a small hotel you are public property.

It's all part of the gig – and people are genuinely so lovely and want to tell you what a great job you're doing. There aren't that many of them comparatively speaking and they actually do really want to know about our daughters and what they are doing at university.

And they remember how two years ago we discussed a wine and expect me to remember the conversation. And of course I must recall discussing their new kitchen and all the problems they were having...

So what's a typical day like? Well, there isn't one – and that variety is the biggest single reason, after 27 seasons, that going to work each day is still a pleasure.

No boss to answer to, no shareholders wanting monthly reports. No million euro profits to spend, but no real hassle either and (mostly) lots of very, very happy people. I guess you could say I was lucky.

So, I hot-foot my way to the nearby village to ask the chemist's advice

People are genuinely so lovely and want to tell you what a great job you're doing



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