

EXPAT

WITH ANDY CHAPELL



Eating out in Spain is a social event – just don't start too early if you want local company. (Picture by Tupungato/Shutterstock)

After midnight

When an evening out begins at 1am and calling it a night at 4am marks you out as a lightweight, it's clear that the time difference between Spain and the UK is a lot more complicated than that single hour...



A small boy watches one of the bands setting up for a festival in the tiny hamlet of Estacion de Benaojan.

IN THE good old days of only flag-carrying airlines plying the route to Malaga from London, a well-schooled voice would remind passengers that they needed to adjust their watches by an hour, to allow for Central European Time being the local currency in Spain. This one-hour change is a bit optimistic – the time variation can be enormous depending on what area of Spanish life you are engaging with. In the early days of our hotel career, back in the late 1980s, our staff's faces were an absolute picture when English visitors with young children were tucking them up in bed by seven in the evening.

To a Spaniard that is verging on child cruelty. It is not at all unusual for children to attend every event at whatever hour the parents decide to partake of the activity. And of course the Spanish clock moves to a different rhythm to a Northern European one. Examples abound but are well illustrated by meal times and social events, and it is the summer that changes the pattern the most.

Fancy an early lunch in our part of the mountains and you are going to be a very lonely, solitary diner until at least 2pm. People regularly arrive at our restaurant at 4.30 looking to start lunch – they leave hungry, however, as our last orders are at 4.

I guess it is the warmth that affects the patterns of the day but schedules are even more different in the evening. Some friends were recently in Sanlucar de Barrameda, the home of Manzanilla sherry. He is a journalist who has spent much of his life travelling Spanish-speaking parts of the world but was still amazed to find the restaurants and tapas bars in the main square of Sanlucar deserted as he and his partner headed out to graze at 10pm. Under the illusion that the Spanish crisis was the reason no one, apart from the occasional other tourist, was in any of the hostleries, they tucked in to plates of seafood with the local tippie. (Incidentally if you have never sipped ice-cold Manzanilla sherry with fresh prawns from

the bay of Cadiz, you have missed out on one of life's great pleasures.) As they headed away for a post-prandial stroll nearing midnight, they found a few locals milling in the streets. When they passed through the same square 30 minutes later they were amazed to see every single table in every single restaurant and bar fully occupied with happy, family groups, including the aforementioned children and babes in arms.

Guests ask us if we feel well integrated after 26 years of Andalucian mountain existence. Well, yes and no is the obvious answer. We have certainly adjusted our meal times – perhaps not to the extremes of midnight but we would not think of eating much before 9pm any evening of the year, and often later in the summer.

Wise people siesta in the August heat if they can, emerging around 6 to begin the afternoon activities and follow that perhaps with a swim, so that the process of preparing for an evening out may well not start until at least 9pm.

So far, so good. What still trips us up though are the hours you are expected to keep for any evening socialising with local people. You visit someone's house for dinner and if you leave before 3am you are a serious lightweight.

Meet someone at a feria and you will be expected to rendezvous at about 1am to start the evening out. We caused severe consternation at a local fiesta recently when we announced at 4am that we were heading homewards. It was assumed, and was best agreed with, that one of us was feeling ill. We later found out that our friends, people nearer retirement than 50, had been eating churros con chocolate at 8am. Where does this energy come from?

And if you are young, wind that clock on a bit more still. Our 18-year-old daughter will meet her friends at 1am to start preparations for a night out. She assures us that the young find it frustrating but that there is no point

whatsoever in hitting the discos and clubs until at least 4am as they will be empty. You had better be prepared to have breakfast with friends before heading home after a night out if you want to be considered at all worthy of the group. A whole raft of bars open early on weekend mornings to cater for the going-home crowd.

On a local level our town hall has suddenly taken it upon itself to organise a music festival near to our hotel this summer. Six different bands are coming from various parts of Spain and not wanting to be killjoys, we welcome the initiative to bring energy and young people to our area. The issue is that we were only told 10 days before the event and already have a hotel fully booked with people of various ages, coming for a peaceful sojourn in the mountains.

We are going to have to tell them that the event is happening nearby and that there may be some sound to contend with. This could easily lead to people postponing or cancelling their visit. We arranged a meeting with our mayor to explain our *dilemma* and he laughed at us. 'There is no worry here at all,' he told us with great sincerity. 'It will not be a late event so you will not even need to advise your customers. We are going to ensure that the music stops by 5 in the morning. No one could possibly object to that.'

Earplugs have been purchased and are available in reception to those who have decided to still visit that weekend. It remains to be seen if the 5am curfew is respected – we are not holding our breath, but we are clutching our earplugs ...

FOR 26 years, Guernseyman Andy Chapell and his partner, Pauline, have run a small hotel in Andalusia's Grazalema Natural Park. Molino del Santo won the TripAdvisor Traveller's Choice Award 2013. www.molinosdelosanto.com.