

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.



La Boda (The Wedding)

I gate-crashed a wedding last week. In my defence, it was a genuine accident, but I am rather pleased that I did. Like many people, I enjoy a good wedding; it is one of those events where the power of love forcibly overpowers the cynicism and doubt that can inhabit some of our lives. It takes the most hardened cynic not to feel just a twinge of emotion and 'something of the beyond' when watching a couple committing themselves to a life with each other.

I was enjoying a drink and people-watching in one of my favourite bars in a nearby village when a large crowd of chattering and laughing Canarians burst through the door. At first I thought that it was a local fiesta, but all wore smart clothes and some were carrying small bouquets of flowers. I soon realised from the conversation that they were attending a wedding that was taking place in the small church next door to the bar. It always amuses me when I see bars situated very closely to the local church, but Catholic services tend to go on for rather a long time, so I guess it is very sensible planning.

This particular group of wedding guests had arrived for the wedding service a little later than planned, and the small village church was already full. Undaunted, the group wisely decided to relocate to the bar next door and to begin their wedding celebrations early. I was told that both the bride and groom were very popular local teachers, which explained the large number of young people in the group.

Spanish and Canarians don't really do small intimate weddings; it is very much a case of 'the bigger the better', and it is not unusual to see the uninvited chatting and gossiping outside a church when the ceremony is in progress in the hope of catching a glimpse of the happy couple after the official event, and taking part in the celebrations afterwards. Spanish weddings are best regarded as marathons, and guests are well advised to allocate a whole day to the celebrations; they are best described as a test of endurance.

After throwing rice over the happy couple (confetti is just not done over here), the couple will be involved in endless photo shoots, which is a good time for guests to head to the local bar, often accompanied by the officiating priest. By the time that the real partying begins, guests are already very happy and ready to tuck into cocktails and canapes, followed by a multi-course banquet (sitting down, of course). Later, coffee and cake are served before guests head to the generous open bar and to enjoy the dancing and raunchy 'follow my leader' games that will eventually bring the celebrations to a close.

At this point, you may well be asking how all this partying is paid for. Traditionally, much of it is paid for by the guests, which is very much part of Spanish tradition going back to the days when this was the only way that a wedding could be paid for. If you are invited to a Spanish wedding, please don't think that presenting the happy couple with an electric toaster will get you off the hook. It will not, but a generous amount of cash or a cheque will do very nicely. A basket is usually handed around during the reception to collect the generous monetary gifts, although the more discrete will have paid the money into the couple's bank account before the event. In order not to appear a cheapskate, a wedding gift should at least cover the cost of your food and drink at the reception, plus a bit more. My partying friends told me that 100 euros per person is currently regarded as the acceptable starting point.

My wedding party, and I say 'mine' because I was invited to join in, quickly entered into the celebratory spirit. Later, huge doors were opened to the rear of what appeared to be a small cafe bar to reveal a huge banqueting hall all beautifully set out for the lengthy banquet to come. We were soon joined by the main guests, looking very relieved as they escaped from the church and headed to the bar. Later, much later, the bride and groom would join the party and the real fun could begin.

I had unexpectedly witnessed and briefly taken part in yet another side of Canarian life. Sadly, I had another engagement to go to, and reluctantly left before the bride and groom returned from their photo shoot. I left wondering what condition the guests would be in the following morning, but felt quite sure that they would have given the happy couple a day that they would never forget.

If you enjoyed this article, take a look at Barrie's websites: <http://barriemahoney.com> and <http://thecanaryislander.com> or read his latest book, 'Living in Spain and the Canary Islands' (ISBN: 9780995602724).

Available in paperback, as well as Kindle editions. Join him on Facebook: www.facebook.com/barrie.mahoney