The Fires of Javea - Summer 2016

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By the time the hottest day of the year had baked and sizzled its way to darkness, September 5th, 2016, the little town of Javea in southeast Spain was on fire.

The fire was reported to have been started in three separate locations and, with the searing heat, three little fires easily became one big fire. It was the first time I'd been evacuated from anything. The fire was getting close to the villa I'd taken up on the cape at Cabo La Nao and had already run through houses and apartments in neighbouring districts, all unbeknownst to me. A bottle of wine and I were on the terrace by the pool. The first thing was the smell but that was probably next door's barbecue. Then, I noticed the streetlights seemed to be getting brighter but they weren't streetlights.

The bang on the door told me to take the car and head to the Arenal and the sea and stay there, and do it quick smart. My Spanish was only a month old but the fireman managed to make it clear I needed to put all my gas bottles in the pool so they didn't explode in the heat. I grabbed a bag, passport, phone, cash and cards and left the firemen telling everyone else in Le Siset street.

Driving down from the cape, I started to see more of the red glow and there was more smoke, enough to slow to 20kph. There was a spot off the side of the road that revealed the full panoramic horror of it, another first for me and one I never want to see again. The fire was massive. It looked like someone had napalmed the Javea hills. I could almost see the wall of fire advance down the slopes towards the sea, slow as a cloud but advancing. I couldn't imagine it being stopped.

And my house and all its stuff were about a hundred yards away from it.

Planes and helicopters were everywhere, getting water from the sea, dumping it on the fire. They took the water from the swimming pools as well, which were much closer to the fire. The helicopters would drop a scoop into a pool and pinch over half of it. The thing was, sometimes they'd scoop up the gas bottles left in the pool as well. A little while later there would be random explosions across the hillsides.

I looked down on the Arenal. The fire hadn't got near there yet. I remembered wondering what would happen if it did. If the fire reached the sea there was only one thing to do, swim.

We all stuck it out in the Arenal, forced to stay in bars and restaurants until daylight. Everyone was aware of the fire, you just needed to head down onto the sand and you could see it, but life went on exactly the same as it did the day before as the bars in the street all combined to become one street-sized bar of all ages and races.

The adults lined the street outside the bars and the kids headed off with a ball or two to tear each other up in the safe area. Every so often, a stray ball and a broken glass would have one or two of them sat on their naughty steps, but this was life, all part of the sounds of a small Spanish town, fire or no fire. The street seemed to have some sort of immunity.

In the end, the fire never got to the sea. The wind had changed, came in from the sea and blew it back to where it had just burned and it ran out of things to burn. The firefighters got on top of it and it was over.

Later that day, they opened the road. The closer I got to the house, the more I wondered if I'd put my giant clown feet in it and made a huge mistake with this *moving to Spain* thing. Driving up that hill, my house, and what little I'd got in it, would probably be consumed by fire.

I turned into Le Siset. There was still a fair bit of smoke and I got a bad feeling. Was I about to open the scolding hot gate to reveal a crispy abode? But the closer I got, the more I knew none of it was coming from my house. The house was fine. Maybe it was immune, just like the street earlier. I had half a swimming pool left but Miguel had already stuck the hose in it. The filter's going to be put through its paces, he said.

There was a carpet of ash everywhere and the smell more than lingered, but the fire had been stopped and no-one had died.

Tomorrow, possibly with a big sigh of relief and a silent prayer for the fire crews, Javea would continue being busy and buzzy, fruity and so much fun. There was probably a festival starting any time soon. You know something is up with a peaceful world when the police start blocking bits of town off. There normally follows a battery of random explosions as some fabulous saint is processed through the streets on a trailer, robes and candles lining the roadsides. With or without a fire, Javea has the most festivals in Spain and Spain has the most festivals in Europe.

It was going to get noisy and thank the saints we were all still here.