



ABOVE: Casa Girasol (Sunflower House) in Las Navas on the edge of the Subbética National Park had no water, no drainage and a leaking roof.

LEFT: The casita now has real sunflowers planted all around the grounds, including a blood red variety that the locals find very strange.

RIGHT: Looking from the sun terrace through the antique window into the kitchen of the casita, which contains many original features. Jay and Debbie did all of the internal work and are now fairly proficient builders, painters, plasterers and tilers.



“Jay had lived in 10 different countries but knew that he wanted to settle in Spain. Pretty early on it became evident that we shared the same dream.”

Life among the SUNFLOWERS

Moving from Cornwall to Andalucía, **Debbie Skyrme** and **Jay Leach** have learnt the renovation ropes the hard way, and are now reaping the rewards.

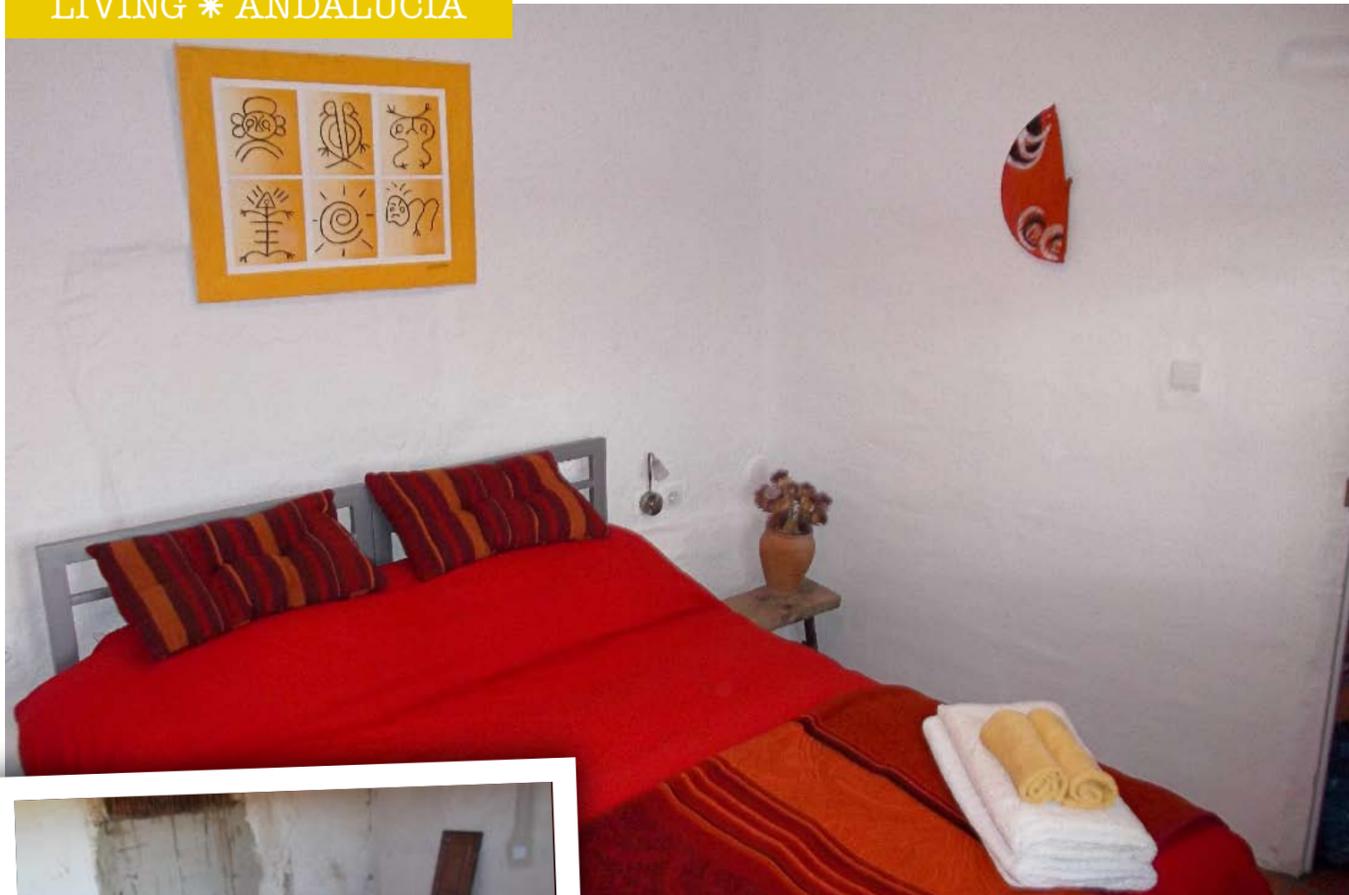
Undertaking a self build or renovation project is challenging enough in the UK. Doing the same in a foreign country, you might think, is asking for trouble. For Debbie Skyrme and her partner Jay Leach, commencing such a mammoth project was all about an exciting route to a new way of life. Having relocated from rural Herefordshire, where she was an unlikely mix of farmer, computer trainer and deputy registrar of birthdays, marriages and deaths, Debbie settled in Cornwall where she met Jay, a web master for a prestigious tertiary college.

Debbie became involved in the tourism industry, managing a portfolio of 200 privately-owned holiday homes, but soon found that her feet were itchy again. “Jay had lived in 10 different countries but knew that he wanted to settle in Spain. Pretty early on it became evident that we shared the same dream,” says Debbie.

In November 2010, they packed up their lives, boarded a dog-friendly ferry and set sail to Spain for good. They rented a property in Andalucía for the first six months to be doubly sure that the area was the best one for them, and to give them plenty of time for finding their long-term home.

Debbie and Jay spent hours looking at properties on the internet before moving to rural Andalucía, as well as exploring the area through the virtual perspective of Google Streetmap, exploring the streets of hundreds of villages and towns, eventually deciding on the Jaén/Granada/Córdoba triangle.

Their search of the area led them to a dilapidated cortijo – a country house – 3,000 feet up the sierra of Córdoba. Uninhabited for 20 years, the property was surrounded by artichoke plantations, a small olive grove and its own water well. It also had no kitchen or bathroom, no mains water, no drainage,



The foundations of the main house were exposed in the guest casita, and the chimney breast was removed to create as much space as possible.



a leaking roof and no toilet. The website domain name www.casagirasol.co.uk (meaning Sunflower House) had been purchased before Debbie and Jay even left the UK, and in this property they had found exactly what they were looking for – enough land for them to grow their own vegetables, and the potential to earn a living renting out a casita, self-contained living accommodation for paying guests. “Artichoke House just didn’t have the same ring to it!” says Debbie, who has grown sunflowers in the garden since completing the project, ensuring the house lives up to its name.

Renovation work began, the majority of which was undertaken by Debbie and Jay themselves, driving for an hour at either end of the day back to their rented home. The first job was to install a *fosa séptica* (septic tank), a toilet and a tap from the well to access the water. The leaking roof was less of a priority. “Andalucía is reputed to have at least 300 days of sunshine a year, so we put the leaking roof to the back of our minds,” admits Debbie.

Within six weeks, the couple had done enough to move in, having completed the bedroom, toilet and bidet, the latter being used as a washbasin and kitchen sink. Showers were taken outdoors using water heated by the sun. “Think Heath Robinson,”

says Debbie. “We were camping indoors, to all intents and purposes.”

Events took a turn for the worst when, that Easter, the heavens opened and the leak in the roof became more of a problem. The rain was so heavy that drops came through even to the ground floor bedroom. Debbie and Jay had no choice but to pop in some earplugs and pretend it wasn’t happening.

Once the rain passed, the couple knew they had to bite the bullet and employ a Spanish builder to restore the roof. With Jay helping out on the labouring, the work came in under budget, giving Debbie and Jay the confidence to ask him to reroof the outhouses and begin work on the guest casita. Sadly the couple made the mistake of allowing work to continue without obtaining a formal quote. When they requested one, they were given vague reassurances that “it won’t cost that much”, but with four solid walls and the roof now in place, and still no quote, they both began experiencing sleepless nights at the fear of the debt they were accruing. They insisted on getting a price for *las obras* (the work) to date, which proved a bargain by UK standards, but made a big dent in their budget. “Within 24 hours the work stopped and we were on our own again. We learnt so much from our Spanish



Debbie and Jay lived in the house while the work was carried out, sometimes without a roof, and for three months there was a piece of cardboard for the front door.



This is the main house and guest casita as it is today – there is a sun terrace and above ground pool. Guests are welcome to wander through the olive groves which are in the process of being transformed into a fantastic garden area.

builders though. Jay is now a proficient wall builder and can turn his hand to just about any project. I can plaster, tile and dry-stone wall with the best of them, so we just knuckled down and got on with it.”

Many of the property’s original features have been retained and restored, and Debbie rescued a series of artefacts from the old outbuildings, which once accommodated animals, to ensure that the interior of the casita was as authentic and rustic as possible.

Within one year, the guest accommodation was ready and Debbie began taking bookings, soon finding that it was fully booked up until the end of October 2012.

Now that the project is finished, Debbie and Jay have time to enjoy their little corner of southern Spain. Debbie spends the summers running open-air yoga classes, and the entire olive-growing community gets together to harvest walnuts and almonds, make goats’ cheese, share recipes for preserving glut of fruit and vegetables, and prepare hams, black pudding and chorizo. “We were careful never to balk when given a freshly shot hare to dress or invited to join in with the community *matanza* (pig killing and sausage making). We wanted to integrate completely, and did this long before allowing ourselves the reward of sightseeing,” says Debbie. “The doors are always open here. Generations of families still live together, neighbours share produce, cheese is made by hand, goats with bells roam the hillside, fiestas with paellas big enough to feed the entire village are the norm. Family values are still important.”

This idyllic existence is everything Debbie and Jay dreamt it would be, and they have no intention of cutting short their time spent among the sunflowers.



ABOVE: Many of the old tools and implements found in the old animal building have been rescued, including antique oil and water jars and the mule tack. A stool made of olive wood that was used to drain the goats’ cheese now makes a beautiful bedside table.



MIDDLE: The outline of the original stable roof is visible. Jay made a feature of the exposed foundations to the main house by creating a seating area on the retaining wall.

RIGHT: Debbie rescued and renovated the old glass wine vessels and clay pots used to store olive oil and pig fat that she found in the stables.

