

TORREVIEJA

Torrevieja is a city on the southern coast of the province of Alicante, in the Vega Baja region; it has a registered population of 88,388 inhabitants, with around 130,000 winter residents and 650,000 in the summer. In the 1960s this old fishing town had just over 9,500 inhabitants. Torrevieja's population has increased by 314% in 20 years and is now one of the most important cities in the Community of Valencia; the population in the census has grown by 50% just in the years 2000 and 2002. It is the fastest-growing city in terms of its population over the last 20 years in the whole Community of Valencia

It is the epicentre of an economic sub-area which includes the municipalities of Benijófar, Guardamar, Los Montesinos, Pilar de la Horadada, Rojales and San Miguel de Salinas. 93% of Torrevieja's entrepreneurial base belongs to the service sector.

It is 41 kilometres from Alicante to the north, 23 from Elche in the north-west and 53 from Murcia in the south. Torrevieja has a protected Natural Park with two salt lakes and 20 kilometres of coast with six long beaches – La Mata, Cabo Cervera, Los Locos, El Cura, Los Náufragos and Ferris – and some twenty coves with a large quantity of cliffs. Torrevieja has lost 20% of its wooded area in ten years to the pressures of speculation and urban development. It enjoys a continental, temperate climate, with temperate winters and gentle summers, temperatures between 18 and 25 for most of the year.

Torrevieja has more than 100,000 residencies which are second homes. The hotel capacity is 2,713 beds. The average rate of annual occupation is 75%. It receives more than two million visitors a year.

It is currently a metropolis with 100 urban developments and streets which have a multicultural, multiracial character that is difficult to define. More than 60 languages from all over the world are spoken in Torrevieja and you can find people from 144 nationalities.

In the last five years a hundred murders have been perpetrated, with 49 violent deaths in two years. A Torreviejan is twenty times more likely to die violently than an inhabitant of Madrid. In 2000, there were 22 murders in a population of 51,000 inhabitants. The yearly balance-sheet of crime increases 30% annually. There is a murder every 15 or 20 days. In Madrid there is annually a murder for every 44,117 inhabitants; in Torrevieja there is one for every 2,312 registered inhabitants. You are twenty times more likely to meet a violent death in this locality near Alicante. Fifty or so organised criminal gangs operate in the Torrevieja area, including mafias into drugs, arms trafficking, prostitution networks, organisations for money-laundering and a Russian mafia well-established in social terms. The speculation requirements of these mafias and their urgent need to launder money have transformed Torrevieja into a cheap housing paradise. For this reason it attracted tens of thousands of working-class people who could acquire houses very, very cheaply.

The constant burgling of houses on these developments has forced some neighbours to create neighbourhood patrols like Home Watch, a network of old people who keep watch from home in contact with the local police and who pass on information about any suspicious activity on the estate. A hierarchical group which filters information through several area coordinators and a general one which distributes the observation work per hour among the least busy members of the community.



A Brick Culture

Daniel G. Andújar

“The newest form of corruption is urban development and land organisation.”

Antonio Vercher, Supreme Court Prosecutor, inaugural lecture of the seminar *Corruption: causes, effects and legal procedures*, UIMP Valencia, 8 September 2003.

The number of 500 euro notes circulating in Spain has tripled. Within two years 43 million 500 euro notes have gone into circulation, that is equivalent to 21,331 million euros. According to the Bank of Spain the value of these 500 euro notes represents 35.22% of the total amount of money in circulation. But who has seen them? After the switch to the euro, the Bank of Spain detected a great wave of laundering of black money which was invested in property. The price of property has increased by 91% in five years and a large part of the property bubble created is down to corruption in urban development. Spain is the country in Europe that has consumed the most cement in the last five years.

The axis for the model for tourist and urban development now promoted on Spain's coasts goes well beyond encouraging programmes and projects to improve people's quality of life today and in the future. The search for economic growth at all the cost is one of the pivots of the model for the tourist development that can be seen on the coast. One can observe this without difficulty in cities like Torrevieja, the centre and capital of a tourist area with more than 130,000 dwellings in residential areas and the city centre, with a population higher than 130,000 in the low season and more than 600,000 in the high season.

During the move to democracy, the political and social stage in our country saw a new social model shaped by people of the most diverse origins who were intent on getting a piece of the action, their basic aim being to earn money at all cost, to grow economically at the same dizzying rate as their town, operating from a legal base which they either transformed or simply ignored.

Often, when we talk about corruption we tend to identify this concept with the dark world of drugs or arms trafficking, with prostitution or the organised mafias behind illegal immigration. The concept of corruption is evidently much broader and is better kept flexible. In the context of the tourist areas on the Mediterranean coast the word corruption triggers attitudes, strange psychological responses and reflex reactions, that forces one to look the other way. Urban mafias, black money and the laundering of capital are not identified as criminal acts. The most immediate reference points for corruption are so taken for granted as part of the newly acquired idiosyncrasies on the



coast, that they are seen as the concern of others. It is something too everyday and too close. What is certainly true is that the Spanish coastline sees a greater movement of black money in the building industry than in drugs, arms trafficking and other activities that we immediately recognise as criminal. And corruption has no prejudice: in urban development it is so generalised and taken for granted that it impacts on everyone, political parties, different social classes, and all kinds of professional. Mafias and organised crime have penetrated the town-planning of these municipalities, though it is not recognised as such since friends, neighbours, relatives, one-self included, benefit or hope to in the future, thus forming part of a system that is rotten. A complex system and authentic web of corrupt activities, financial entities close to mafia organisations, connections with corrupt low or high level civil servants, representatives of anonymous investors under cover of practices of Spanish lawyers that are created to protect the anonymity of the real financial backers.

Pots of money are moved in suitcases and sacks, not through banks, and nobody wonders where it comes from. For some mayors it has simply meant financial support for their plans for urban development. The municipalities facilitate the process by reducing the price of land and providing building permissions that allow high-rise blocks to be constructed that are at odds with recommendations in relation to the conservation of the natural environment or beauty of tourist areas. Urban development has become a fertile terrain for corruption that goes way beyond the political frame. The legal system is incapable of putting a brake on an activity associated with money laundering and the earning of illegal commissions.

Tourist interests in town halls, building companies, engineers and local citizens has meant more and more building on a coastal strip that gets broader and broader, a predatory action the consequences of which do not seem to worry anyone. A real wedge now penetrates unhindered the interior from the Mediterranean coast. There are towns in the interior which are losing their contours and customary environment. Urban development is also quietly aggressive on the second beach front.

This tourist activity involved and involves an obvious, visible impact on the environment as well as being a transformation and fundamental change in the social, political, economic and cultural context. The profound economic transformation provoked by this activity has changed patterns of behaviour in the smallest aspects of everyday life and led to ways of life where the consumerist, competitive paradigm of the big cities is relegated to the background: the basic priority is to amass a fortune by the quickest route. All this takes place in a complex scenario, a linguistic and social tower of Babel (there are more than 140 nationalities registered in the Vega Baja) with banks, creeds and religions to suit all tastes.



Corruption is general, particularly on the coast where economic interests go way beyond what ordinary citizens can imagine. It has an impact on all parties since mayors and councillors from both parties can see easy ways to secure rapid, unimaginable income through urban development.

Complicity is absolute. Nobody wishes to reproach in someone else the defect they would not censure in themselves. One keeps quiet in certain circumstances about certain matters: the mayor's got a new Mercedes?, if it's a present or *quid pro quo*, nobody worries, it's to be expected, tomorrow it could be me, or I may want them to re-value that insignificant bit of orchard I just inherited.

The physical space one occupies has come to be valued as a source of income, of immediate interest and attached to traditional mechanisms for exploitation and profit-taking. The process of exhausting resources and altering the conditions for a balanced environment is the most immediate consequence, but it is not the only one. The tourist market is related to the promotion of products connected with the quality of life, but what is definitely up for sale and really able to change the social context is the fact that people can get rid of their family or community heritage in order to get a return that is immediate but of dubious value in the long term.

If there is a field of melons or some fallow land where millions can grow like daisies, who can turn that down? The residential model for low-rise housing quickly runs out of steam, and high-rise blocks become the order of the day and when this model is exhausted, the move inland becomes unstoppable. The municipality becomes a surveying and re-valuation business. The position of councillor for town planning is fought over to the death and middle-men and their commissions camp out in the council chambers. Town-planning agreements and re-valuations are auctioned like scarce bricks. Where there was an orchard, agricultural or live-stock land or woods, there is now housing. Where permission was given for three stories, there are now seven. If in a 1000 square metre plot the building density was 150 metres, it is rapidly re-assessed at 400. Areas for public leisure activity (educational, sporting or green) become available for residential building. Cranes invade everywhere, and if it is not a crane, it is a golf course. The space around town halls becomes choc-a-bloc at midday with Mercedes bringing people for the daily business lunch. The local population becomes very flexible, from the hazardous life of a fisherman to one as prosperous plumber, the *farmacéutico* becomes an *apotecar* and the *panadería* a bakery. Politicians harangue the population with promises of golf-courses and estates with 30,000 flats in communities with a few thousand inhabitants, the hypnotic effect of their words is translated automatically into money. And money into social success.

Politicians and builders phone each other at dusk, do deals and dot the i's and cross the t's in a discreet brothel.



Conversation between A and B

(Transcription of telephone conversations recorded by the police with a legal warrant on 11 February 1990 at 1:22 pm)

A: Hey.

B: Yeah.

A: What are we doing in the office on a Sunday?

B: I'll start by telling you you're a bastard, a poof, a wanker...

A: Why?

B: What? Look: you know Father J.F. is dying and don't tell me. You go off to the launch of F's magazine. You don't call me to go with you (...). Well, my friend, I'm off on Tuesday. I thought I'd leave you out, but that upsets me. I'm getting into finance. I'm going to Seville on Tuesday.

A: Why?

B: R's boss is there.

A: But what are you going to do there?

B: Hey?

A: What are you going to buy?

B: I'm going to see, now they've got rid of Juan Guerra, to see if...

A: To see if...

B: To see if I can take his place.

A: OK, but, are you going to buy or sell?

B: Hey?

A: What are you going to sell?

B: I'm going to ask R to explain to me what I've got to do. I'll offer him my services.

A: But explain to him... Me as well, OK?

B: Hey?

A: Explain what I'm doing here.

B: You want a bit of the action, right?

A: Right.

B: We'll sell and buy and act as middlemen.

A: Right.

B: For them.

A: Right.

B: You know? I'm going to Seville with him on Tuesday, and on Wednesday I'll be in Madrid.

A: Oh, great!

B: Yeah. I'm always on the move.

A: I'll be there on Thursday for sure.

B: In Madrid on Thursday? Well, how's business these days? They told me you're a property dealer as well. Or are you building?

A: Yes. Say, have you got a spare limited company?

B: A spare limited company... I might have.

A: Well, get me a limited company.

B: Yeah?

A: Yeah.

B: But why don't you set one up yourself?

A: No. For a simple reason; because I want one...

B: Yeah.

A: Registered in Alicante...

B: OK.

A: And that I can put... Because I've already got one. Look at T's share.

B: OK.

A: And I've the F.F. group one.

B: OK.

A: And I want to buy another company.

B: OK.

A: They're all pretty small, three or four people. But they're going to get very big...

B: You remember the one you've had for years in Valencia, the one called PubliM, don't you?

A: Yeah, but I don't know what's happened to it.

B: We didn't fold it or anything, did we?

A: Right. We could transfer the PubliM company.

B: And any day the tax people would be down on us like a ton of bricks.

A: Yeah.

B: Because we didn't do returns. Even if they were negative. Hey? I've got a couple of companies here that might do you (...) I reckon I might have an agency in Silla, apart from the one in Ondara, and I could get you in there as well.

A: The what?

B: Yeah. Because J.S.L., that guy who's here in Benidorm.

A: OK.

B: He might go for the plot and we'd make something, right? You can be the middle man in the sale, 'cos I can't, and you get a percentage from J.S.L. Right? And then we'll split it on the side.

A: To sell to...?

B: To sell or swap it. It doesn't make any difference to him if he sells it or swaps it with this friend of mine.

A: But he's already done a deal with me.

B: The bastard. We ate together in Madrid on Wednesday and he agreed he'd speak to this guy.

A: On Wednesday?

B: Yes, last Wednesday. Didn't he tell you?

A: He was with me on Tuesday.

B: Wait a minute. I'll tell you what day it was. Wednesday.

A: Did he tell you he'd seen me on Tuesday ?

B: Yes, he said he'd seen you.

A: In Valencia.

B: Right. That he'd been there. And on Wednesday.

A: And on Wednesday, selling me out?

B: What? On Wednesday he'd already sold you out.

A: What a bastard.

B: You can't trust anybody.

A: They paid him in cash.

B: What?

A: They paid him in cash.

B: On Wednesday he had dinner with me, in Madrid. We ate with A.C.

A: What a guy!

B: OK. Hey, if you're not elected and I'm president for Valencia, I'll make you a deputy in Alicante.

A: That would be really good.

B: Right?

A: I've got to go to the Ondara area. As I'm going to build...

B: As you're now an entrepreneur in Ondara, ever since you came out on the Marina Alta.

A: Fuck!

B: Hey?

A: What a guy!

B: Incredible.

A: El Bo., sold to me. The day after.

B: The day after.

A: He didn't let twenty-four hours go by, right?

B: No, you hadn't arrived because it was midday... It was two o'clock.

A: Fuck, what a guy. I'll tell him... Well, then... Did he say whether S. is going to do it or go to see the land?

B: Yes. If he's interested, right?, rather than negotiate with el Bo., you can do it.

A: Of course I can. He's not got the least bloody idea.

B: And you act as if you'd already got it sorted, right?

A: Yes.

B: And you tell him you want a little hand-out. Ask him for two million pesetas or three or whatever you...

A: No, I'll ask him for more...

B: Yeah? Whatever he gives you, you give me half on the side.

A: But if we've got to share it, fuck...

B: I told you: pay this lad for the contract...

A: If we've got to take shares... We've got to ask him for a bit more.

B: OK, just a bit more. The fact is I've no idea what the land is worth.

A: I'll explain to him.

B: OK? You explain to him and get the dough from him. And keep quiet about the business in Seville, right? On Wednesday you call me and I'll tell you about Seville.

A: Yes, of course.

B: I'll wait for you to explain. Let's see how I can... I'll take an easy approach. I'll sit down to eat with him and I'll ask him how I can get a bit of the action.

A: Right.

B: It's all straightforward. Right? He should give me several options and I'll take what's easiest. But I've got to make a packet because I'm bankrupt, Br.

A: How's that possible? You're working like crazy.

B: I'm working lots, but I'm bankrupt.

A: How come?

B: It all goes on politics. Can't you see I don't have a salary like you. You get money from the work we all do in Spain.

A: Right.

B: But that's how things are. Oh...! I've got to earn lots, I need lots of money to live. I've got to buy a car now. Do you like the 16 valve Vectra?

A: Course I do...

B: And how you getting on with your girl friend?

A: I'm not.

B: All over?

A: Yes, for some time.

B: But didn't you go back? As you faked it in the wedding...

A: No... But I did sleep in her house.

B: Yeah? And you still do but not...

A: But not...

B: None of that formal stuff...

A: Right.

B: That's much more sensible!

A: I don't get you, I'd...

B: It's a lot cleverer.

A: I don't get you at all. This is the kind of thing I don't understand.

B: But if you're carrying on the same, what does it matter if you're married or not?

A: When I go to Madrid, I sleep in her house.

B: Naturally.

A: And get a bit of relief, just a little bit and why not!

B: Better...

A: Which means as I have to go to Madrid often... That is, in the week I don't come here. I don't understand, I just don't. Apart from the fact she's not on the lookout, she's not into anything or anybody.

B: It's good deal.

A: She's not going out with anyone else.

B: You're onto a good thing.

A: She's not going out with anyone else.

B: The fact is... Fashions change and we don't adapt to them.

A: Fucking hell!

B: Don't... let go. This is a good thing. Don't waste it.

A: I save myself a pile whenever I go to Madrid.

B: Naturally. You stay at her place.

A: I don't go whoring or pay for a hotel, right?

B: A good deal, Br.

A: OK.

B: Hey, I'm going to carry on working a bit more.

A: Fine. And get me that company somehow.