

## Battle for Trafalgar as developers eye Spain's last unspoilt shores

A storm is brewing in the south of Spain as developers move in on one of the last unspoilt stretches of coastline.

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The sun is setting over the Atlantic waves on El Palmar beach, casting long shadows of two wetsuit-clad teenagers leaning against their surfboards. But as the light fades on another peaceful day in this remote corner of southern **Spain**, the Andalusian government and the property developers it backs are hard at work finalising their plans to shake up the region, and build a hotel for 1,300 people.



Los Canos de Meca and Cabo Trafalgar lighthouse Cadiz Province Spain Photo: ALAMY

The decision has sparked a fierce debate over the past errors of unfettered construction, pitting those worried about the financial torpor against environmentalists who see the forest of skyscrapers and thick crust of costal developments as a warning about the perils of construction fever.

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"The continued costal development is suicide," said Miguel Angel Losada, of the University of Granada's centre for the Andalusian environment. "It is unsustainable and an absolute catastrophe to keep building."

To that end, what might have been a local planning debate has become the focus of nationwide soul-searching.

A 13-part television series, almost three years in the making and scripted by Mr Losada, has recently begun

showing on Spanish national television, entitled *Las Riberas del Mar Océano* (The Shores of the Ocean).

"The dimensions of the problem are enormous," he said. "Over 80% of the Spanish coast has been developed – either in hotels, apartments, roads or ports.

"And it's not just Spaniards that need to be aware. In the south of England, in Denmark, along the French and Italian coasts – everyone is being fed the myth that building equals tourism equals wealth. It is not true."

Indeed, many observers believe that the Costa del Sol, a mere 100 miles from the Cadiz coastline, should act as a stark warning about the perils of over-development.

Since the advent of mass tourism in the 1950s, an anarchic sprawl of hotels, beach resorts and apartments have grown along the southern coast. Under Franco's regime, the construction boom unleashed by his cronies was unrestricted, limitless and hungry.

More recently, the monstrous Algarobico hotel – a huge, empty shell leering over the beach near Almería – still serves as a concrete symbol of the threat to Spain's coasts. The hotel was built in 2003, on the border of the Cabo de Gata natural park, but never opened and was immediately subject to legal wranglings that continue to this day over its proposed demolition. Authorities now say that demolition is technically and physically impossible, owing to the 65,000 cubic metres of concrete which cannot be removed from the hillside.

Spain is at last perhaps appearing to take action against the excess of southern coastal construction. The country's largest-ever corruption trial is currently underway in Marbella, unpeeling layers of corruption and bribes in return for building permits that have turned the area into a maze of apartments and hotels.

And earlier this month, in a new investigation, three people were arrested in Murcia – including the director of urban planning – on allegations of illegal construction.

Earlier this month, the MEP Raúl Romeva raised concerns over the new El Palmar project in the European Parliament, asking Janez Potocnik, Environment Commissioner, to confirm that the proposed hotel complied with requirements to deal with sewage and residual water. The 600-inhabitants of El Palmar are not currently connected to the main water system.

For the residents of El Palmar, on the Costa de la Luz, that is precisely why they accept plans for the Gran Palmar hotel. Gathered in the family-run beach-front hostel of Luis Alferez, president of the neighbour's association, the village representatives tell *The Sunday Telegraph* that they are desperately in need of improved infrastructure.

"The planned hotel is an evolution of the land, not an aggressive development. It won't ruin the beach" said Montserrat Molina, of the parents' association of El Palmar. Her great-grandparents were among the first to build on the land.

"Many of the houses here don't have electricity, and rely on generators. And some of the tourists came along and said how beautiful it was not to have electricity, so that you can see the stars. I said to them they should try living like that," she scoffs.

"We have to be realistic about things. If this is the way we will have improved infrastructure, and better services, then so be it," she said.

Salvador Ramos, president of the Parados de Vejer (job-seekers association) agrees that the proposed hotel will boost the economy.

"This is exactly what we need," he said, paintbrush in hand as he decorated a house in the cobbled streets of Vejer.

"We are desperate for any work. The ecologists against it are not realistic."

It is clear that Spain – and the Cadiz region in particular - is in dire need of job creation. Unemployment currently runs at 20.9% - double the EU average of 10% and the worst in the whole of the eurozone.

And within Spain, **Cadiz is the province with the highest rate of job seekers**. Over 30% of people are without work, and figures for September show a surge in numbers signing on to benefits as the summer tourist season draws to a close.

The economic argument is one taken up with gusto by the administration in Vejer de la Frontera town hall. Antonio Muñoz, director of planning and the environment, describes the proposed hotel as "an opportunity for enriching the local economy, for investment and for employment."

"When people have seen so much destruction of the Spanish coast, so much barbarity, they automatically think this is another monstrosity. But we are talking about a hotel set well back from the shore, with buildings a maximum of seven metres high, that will not damage the environment.

Mr Muñoz rose from his desk, and pointed out a splattering of small houses and buildings dribbled across the coast.

"You see these? All of them are illegal. People build anywhere. And it would take an army to stop them – they come in the middle of the night, build foundations, and then it takes years and years of legal arguments to counter it.

"I don't understand why people complain about this legal, sustainable hotel when there is so much illegal building all along the coast."

Campaigners against the hotel refute the arguments emanating from the town hall and developers. They argue that building a hotel in El Palmar will drive away tourists - including Damien Hirst and his surf-loving wife, Spanish actor Javier Bardem, and British rock star Paul Weller - who appreciate one of the last unspoilt stretches of Spanish coastline. They are sceptical about claims of creating 300 jobs, claiming many will be temporary, badly paid, and handed to people from outside the area.

"It is absurd that the local government thinks that building is the way to get us out of this mess – when it was construction that played a large part in creating the problem," said Tatiana Rodriguez, president of the Salvar El Palmar campaign.

"Of course the countryside has to progress, but building megahotels is not the answer. How is the money going back to the local economy, if people are wearing wrist-bands in an all-inclusive resort?"

Miss Rodriguez launched her campaign on Facebook at the end of last year, gaining 17,000 supporters in one week. The group now has 47,000 supporters, and is currently working in alliance with Greenpeace and other lobbies in the Spanish costal provinces of Galicia, Murcia and Asturias.

Driving along the windswept coast, past the lighthouse on Trafalgar Point where the great sea battle was fought in 1805, Miss Rodriguez heads past great untouched stretches of beach, flanked by sand dunes and backed by olive groves.

But suddenly the trees stop, and at Sancti Petri, a line of hotels begins.

"I call this Babel," said Juan Antonio Gotor de Astorza, supporter of the campaign.

"All these luxury hotels, where once there were pine trees. It breaks my heart. And it's a ghost town – it's out of season now, so there is no one here. It's not like the Costa del Sol, which is warm all year round – here the wind really blows. There is no need for all this."

Miguel Angel Losada, scientist and scriptwriter for the costal documentary series, agrees.

"In the end, everyone will pay for this over-development," he said.

"They just cannot keep on like this. And it's not just in El Palmar; there are 20 or 30 cases like this all over

Spain.

"People are sold this idea that tourism is the only solution; that it creates boundless riches.

"But Spain – and the rest of Europe – has to wake up. This process is destroying far more richness than it could ever create."

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