

# ECOLIVING IN THE SPANISH MOUNTAINS



Tony Wrench discovers the village of Matavenero, high up in the northwestern mountains of Spain.

**D**o you ever wonder what it would be like to live in a place with no roads; where the sky is free of vapour trails by day and artificial light by night; where there are no internal combustion engines; where people live in eco-homes they have built over the years with no planning constraints, surrounded by wilderness; in a community dedicated to living sustainably in harmony with each other and with nature?

No doubt there are many places like

this in the world if you really look, but here is one for certain in Europe – Matavenero in the Montes de León in northwest Spain. It has got all those qualities plus fantastic scenery, clean drinking water and a wild climate that gives the most perverse permie something to play with:

**Slope.** From this window I can see over 1km (0.6 mile) down the valley to Poibueno's wooden dens 400m (1,300ft) below; from the next window

we look up to the high peaks around us in all directions. The scale of this whole landscape is massive.

**Climate.** Plenty of rain, snow and frost in winter but good sun aspect too; in summer virtually no rain for five months.

**Soil.** Fruit trees abound; homes are stacked with many kinds of dried fruit (depending on how kind were the previous spring's frosts), plus big racks of walnuts and chestnuts. Most families keep a garden on one or more of the ancient terraces and grow potatoes, carrots, leeks, kohlrabi, brassicas and other veg. Slugs do not seem to like the altitude or climate here, so are not seen as a problem. Wow!

**Wilderness.** More than you can imagine, if you're used to living in Britain. Miles of wilderness. With *wolves* in. I saw one!

*Above:* The village nestling in a fold of the mountains.

*Left:* The wind turbines on the opposite mountainside are the only signs of the modern world.



## TASTE OF WINTER REALITY

Jane and I have come to this ecovillage for three weeks in February to get a taste of what Matavenero is like outside the paradise summer months. If you are thinking about coming to live here you are required by the community to stay through at least four seasons before being offered one of the spare ecohomes to live in, or maybe one of the drystone slate ruins to do up. For Matavenero is based on a depopulated village, founded centuries ago by people who wanted to live at least an hour's walk from the next village – some say they were Cathars in search of a place free from religious dogma. They selected a wild, tough promontory at about 1,000m (3,300ft) altitude (that's as high as the highest mountain in Wales) in this valley that had shelter from the coldest winter winds, good sun all the year round and, critically, access to



reliable spring water. To guarantee themselves this water they built a 2km (1.2 miles) long leat, or small aqueduct, stretching back and up into the adjacent oak-forested north-facing (almost sunless, therefore moist) valley slope. The village was abandoned by its last native inhabitants in the 1970s, and purged subsequently by a forest fire that took all vegetation – huge chestnut trees introduced by the Romans, broom, holly oaks and brambles – down to ground level.

In the late 80s a dedicated group of



*Above:* Snow transforms the village into a set piece Bruegelesk scene.

*Below left:* Ancient stone walls from long abandoned houses edge the lane.

'Rainbow' people – tipi dwellers from communities in Germany and Denmark, Spaniards too, with ecological aspirations but no land, having decided to search for depopulated villages in northern Spain, visited the local administrator in Leûn. He gave them a map with at least 20 villages marked on with two or less inhabitants, and the search began for the new rainbow village. Some of those 1989 pioneers still live here. Alicia, a native of Vigo, 100km (60 miles) west of here, points in mock accusation at Uli, originally from Germany, and says: "He chose this place and when we all gathered here we thought he had picked the worst of the worst! A two-hour hike from the nearest town, steep slopes, no roads, burnt out buildings. Now we are glad that we chose the remotest one – in other villages with road access people still have arguments over grazing rights, or ownership of old houses. With this place the ex-inhabitants had let it all go – we could do what we liked."

So, amazingly, this pueblo, with its sister settlement Poibueno, has its own status as a 'project'. It has a mayor, Josè, who is begged by all to continue, aided by a secretary and treasurer, to deal with outside bodies such as hunting associations, wind power companies making use of its mountain tops, and the forestry

agency that manages the big dark high forests to the south. The state has provided a live-in teacher for the village's dozen or so children between 5 and 11. Other than this, the 40 or so inhabitants of Matavenero enjoy a wacky autonomy over 3,000 hectares (7,400 acres) of wild mountain landscape. They have a consejo, or council meeting, every week, which takes decisions by consensus.

## PERMACULTURE PARADISE?

Is this, then, Permie Paradise? Maybe, but it's tough living out a sustainable dream, even when gravity isn't such a dominant force. Here are a few scenes from our stay here, although I can't show you the ever-changing beauty of the landscape that walks with us at all times:



The biggest sin here is to use up someone else's supply of firewood. So we have to get gathering. Fast. Small firewood can be gleaned by the armful from the bare high ground above the village about 1km (0.6 mile) walk away. For bigger stuff we take an afternoon out along the aqueduct into the woods, plunge up the steep snow-covered slope until we reach an area partly cleared in the past by forestry workers. We heave logs of leg thickness back down the slope, tossing them down, down and down again until we reach the path, and then cut them into 1m (3ft) lengths. Jurgen will come out tomorrow to load as many as he can on his horse Pasha, for €5, and bring them back for our fire.

This afternoon's work has gained us about two or three week's worth of firewood. The ecohome where we stay is a small, eight-sided, two-storey wooden house and has an efficient stove, but no bath or built-in way of heating water. It catches the sun all day, but you know in February that sun all day means a freezing night. The cost in exhaustion and euros of getting a few kilos of firewood sets me thinking like crazy of trombe walls, earth sheltering, thermal banks and alternative insulation. What do chestnut husks burn like? Could they be stuffed in wall cavities as insulation?



The village shop is great. It contains about 1% of the range of the average small supermarket, but everything in it is what you need. It even has a few things you don't need, like excellent bars of chocolate for 60 centimos, about 40p. Last week we bought potatoes, carrots (frozen by leaving outside overnight), fresh oranges, raisins, pistachio nuts, home produced delicious honey, a free cabbage, toilet paper, chocolate and a new bow saw blade all for €14 – less

than £10. There is sometimes a catch in the shopping experience. One day Christina, who runs the shop, is much too busy to serve anyone, because it is the day that Jorn has brought back provisions from town by car, and the boxes of foodstuffs are waiting about 1km (0.6 mile) up the mountain near the euphemistically named 'car park'. All customers are sent up to help bring the supplies down with wheelbarrows, plus Jurgen is there with Pasha, his pony, and Mirusz with his two donkeys. Food here is good and very cheap, and you get fit just buying it, let alone growing it. People are surviving happily so far below the poverty line that it doesn't bear thinking about. Jane and I live off the bottom of the income graph in Wales but I feel quite rich here! How much would people pay for a wooden bowl though? How to get all my workshop stuff up here? And batteries...



Coming back from the shop (open Tuesdays and Fridays 12.00 - 1.30 only!) the pisspot outside our temporary home is still frozen, but the tap is running. So after five days we have running water again. Maybe we can heat enough to squeeze into the hip bath? Yes, just. There's a fortune to be made (payable in chestnuts) for the entrepreneur who imports stoves with back boilers into this part of Spain, and Portugal, from Britain. People here are very excited to hear about the existence of back boilers, but most have not seen one, let alone depended on one for sanity over the years, like me.



To buy fresh milk Jane and I visit Abel and Ula in Poibueno. To get there we go down the path, past the dome, the pyramid, Rolf's wooden house, La Uli's new place – half dry stone slate and half wood – past the chestnut woods then a further kilometre along the valley bottom, crossing the river over the hewn bridge near the ruined monastery then up past the old ruins and veggie garden to Abel and Ula's palacial three-storey wooden tipi, whose skin is made of thousands of wooden orange-box shingles – a true

*Above left:* Tony Wrench and Jane Faith returning with armfuls of collected firewood.

*Above right:* Abel & Ula's three storey, orange box shingled house, based on the shape of a tipi.

*Left:* Crossing the river bridge near the ruined monastery.





*Above:* A cool shady path running through the village.

*Below right:* The local transport stops for a snack.

eco-builder's masterpiece. We are offered glasses of milk and cups of tea sitting in a rustic proliferation of drying seeds and nuts, cheese-making gear, yoghurt jars and all the paraphernalia of a seriously self-sufficient lifestyle. They never take a holiday. Want to help them care for the cows and make and sell dairy products? They'd welcome you with open arms. More people lived here in the past. Now, for most, it's just too quiet. We buy milk, huge leeks and the best beetroot you've ever tasted in your life, and set off back home. The whole trip takes about two hours. Oh my aching feet.



Matavenero is more than just a village. We attend a weekly meeting in one of the communal buildings called the bar. The common language is Spanish, although sometimes significant points are translated into German or English. Maybe half the residents at any one time attend the meeting – in this quiet winter time about a dozen come, and it is clear from the sometimes heated debate that the place needs more concerted energy on maintenance and ongoing projects.

There is a vision here that at times over the past 12 years has been tested almost to breaking point by the stresses of living so close to the sustainable edge. For there is very little slack – everything brought in must be carried by donkey, horse, wheelbarrow, or, in the winter months, on your back on a two-hour trek. The only electricity is from renewable sources. All waste *must* be recycled or carried away back uphill. The same plastic bags appear time and again – old newspapers for firelighting are like gold dust. I eked out a Guardian for three weeks. Very little money is used, but the same euros go round and round (although most people here still keep alive the peseta in conversation, 15 months after it passed away).

Personal tensions can also fester in an isolated place of extremes, so most residents are conscious of the need for social events. While we were there, there was a reggae party, a children's party, a sweat lodge, several women's groups, and several good evenings chanting and singing in the bar, which has its own permanent musical instruments and drums to encourage participation. (I now know the new instrument I want to own – the *laúd*, or Portuguese guitar. It's the local traditional instrument, and is pear-shaped, but plays like a 12 string guitar with a capo on the 5th fret. Beautiful sound. Easy to play. I know it's just a matter of patience, but I can barely live in Britain without one. Sorry.)

## MORE GOOD PEOPLE

For us this has been an amazing stay. Matavenero offers so clearly the manifestation of the sustainable ecovillage dream and also highlights the work, vision, perseverance and positive thinking necessary to continue it in practice. They need more good people here, both families and single people with sticking power and imagination, willing to give that bit more than the stipulated one day a week for communal work. The potential for permaculture, already applied here in the gardens, compost toilets and many other systems, is still enormous. For those seeking a challenge with a heart, this could be it.

If you want to visit Matavenero write to the Consejo, Matavenero, 24300 Bembibre, Leûn, Spain at least two weeks in advance. Take good practical gear including wind-up or solar rechargeable torch – nights can be *really dark* – and something good to share. I can email visitors directions on how to get there: [tonywrench@lineone.net](mailto:tonywrench@lineone.net) 

