

# **Utilities in Spain**

**With Paraiso Homes**

## Utilities

### Communications

Among those newly arrived in Spain there is a common denominator - all want information as soon as possible on telephone systems. They want to know how they can have one installed, what it will cost them and how much call charges are.

This is not surprising. The telephone enables them to communicate with their families at home, summon help in an emergency and allow them to access the internet and world wide web. Spain's national communication company is Telefonica. Previously State-owned, it was privatised in 1997 in an attempt to bring it into line with the communication companies of other countries. As with BT in the UK, lack of competition forced the government to introduce changes and allow other telecommunications companies access to Telefonica's telephone lines and exchange equipments.

The government ended the Telefonica monopoly in 1998 and there are now six companies supplying telephone services. Almost immediately the effect was felt in that there was a sharp reduction in the cost of calls. Competition among the communications companies is fierce and call charges are still the primary marketing weapon. They are however expensive when compared with those which exist in the UK or United States. The Spanish are not particularly energetic or enthusiastic when it comes to telephone use, which probably explains why they have one of the lowest numbers of telephones per capita in the EU.

It would seem at the moment that the understanding or spirit of competition hasn't fully reached home in that most call service providers arrive in a dull way advertising cheaper calls and when they have recruited enough subscribers, promptly raise their prices so as to be the same as all other carriers. With only two telephones for every five people, Spain has one of the lowest numbers of telephones per capita in the European Union. The reason for this no doubt concerns the reluctance of Spanish businessmen to conduct business over the phone, preferring instead to meet over lunch or at least in person. When it comes to mobile phones, the situation is quite different, with Spain being one of the fastest growing countries for this type of communication.

If you buy yourself a resale property in Spain and it has an existing telephone line, you must have it transferred immediately into your own name and agree a date for this to happen with the outgoing owners. Instruct Telefonica to suspend the service and read the account on this day, sending the final bill to the current owners. If you don't do this several things are likely to happen. If the existing owners are foreigners and are returning to their own country it is quite possible that they will say nothing to Telefonica and depart from Spain leaving you with a huge bill. Whilst Telefonica cannot make you pay it, it will take you a long time to sort out the situation and have use of a telephone at all, let alone in your own name.

If there are several numbers on the bill which you have called, the situation in regard to sorting it out will be made even more difficult. Don't use the phone until you know the account is in your name and the clock has been reset. If you are moving into a new property, Telefonica will have to install lines. In some cases, they will have done this during the building process but this is not always the case. You'll know if it is because the property company, estate agent or builder, whoever you dealt with, will have pointed this out to you. Give them plenty of notice in order that your phone is available at the time you move in. Your lawyer or Search and Survey can do this for you if you give instructions to do so. The cost of installation is 150 Euros or about £100.00. Line charges are about 12 Euros per month plus 16 per cent VAT which is similar to the UK. Telephone accounts are rendered every other month, something to remember when trying to compare bills in Spain with what you used to pay in the UK where billing is quarterly.

Theoretically, if you don't have a residence card and you are renting property, you may be asked for a deposit of 200 euros but increasingly this habit is being allowed to lapse. In a half hearted way, Telefonica may suggest that you rent a telephone from them but long term it doesn't pay. You can purchase a telephone from numerous sources in Spain with phones starting as cheaply as £7.

Up until quite recently, a good way to deal with the question of house phones was to purchase a digital cordless telephone from UK. This not only gave a considerable amount of freedom rich facilities but more importantly, avoided Spanish engineers running cable in your home.

These phones are just the job when you're sat round the pool or dreaming on the veranda! Cost in the UK currently is from about £20 but they can now be purchased in Spain for a similar price. As with BT, Telefonica supplies a number of add on services but they don't have the very useful 1471 service. If you enable the call answering service don't be disappointed because it is in Spanish, you can select from a variety of languages or if you wish, leave your own message. You'll definitely need help in configuring this service if you don't speak Spanish.

Whilst the answer service is quite useful, it has been set up very poorly. To recover your messages you lift the telephone and wait for 10 seconds, at the end of which you will be told that you either have messages or don't. Unlike the UK, you do not get a different dial tone which indicates messages waiting. The only assistance given to subscribers of this service in identifying whether or not they have message is a user determined time at which you will be phoned every day if you have messages waiting. It goes without saying that each time you check to see if you have messages, a little is added to your phone bill.

There are two primary tariffs in Spain: National and International. The national tariff is divided into local/metropolitan call within your province and calls out side your province. The only company to be able to offer local calls is Telefonica. They installed and own the cabling and until such time as the Spanish communication industry is shaken out a little more, the situation is unlikely to change. The charge for a call consists of an initial connection fee of 7 cents plus 2.5 cents per minute during normal times and 1 cent per minute at reduced rate. Normal hours are the same as those in the UK and are from 0800 - 1800 hrs Monday - Friday and reduced rates are from 1800 - 0800 hrs Monday - Friday and over the entire week end period and national public holidays of which there are many.

Provincial charges vary enormously initially but all seem to work out the same in the end. As they are constantly changing, as the service providers flex their marketing muscles, no attempt is going to be made to point you in the direction of the cheapest if only because the situation will have changed by the time this document is published. However, charges range from 4 cents per minute at reduced tariff to 6 cents per minute at peak tariff and you should note that rarely do Telefonica offer anywhere near the cheapest rate available. As the communication market slowly unwinds in Spain it will become more competitive but until then you need to shop carefully for the best prices. Don't pay too much attention to recommendations because even if they are given with the best of intentions, many are hopelessly wrong by virtue of being outdated.

IDD - International Direct Dialing is possible in Spain with most countries accessible from private, public or business phones. Competition for customers is said to be fierce but the prices charged are more indicative of a cartel than a scramble for business by competing companies. Telefonica and the second largest company, Retevision, both charge a 12 cent connection charge on top of the call rate - something which is not done by the other companies. Jazztel offers a peak rate to Europe of 25 cents per minute with off peak calls costing 15 cents. VAT is extra at 16 per cent.

Some companies such as Telefonica and Retevision charge much more than this whilst others charge less. One thing is certain, at the present time rates are changing constantly and knowing who charges what and which tariff applies at the time is almost impossible to determine with any degree of accuracy.

When it comes to making international calls many believe that they are better off using "call-back Companies". These give you a number to call which automatically calls you back and allows you to make your call on a cheaper network. Such services used to be considerably cheaper than

many of the Spanish telecom companies but increasingly are losing their way. You should expect to pay about 18p per minute for calls from Spain to the United Kingdom and a little more to the Republic of Ireland. You would probably do better giving call back companies a miss.

If you have to use directory enquiries, there is a charge of 28 cents for domestic directory enquiries and 1 euro for international numbers. For directory enquiries you dial 1003. However, when it comes to international enquires, it is often quicker to phone the UK and ask a friend to get the number for you.

Finally, a useful piece of information concerns the fact that Spain subscribes to a Home Direct Service. This enables you to call a number giving you direct and free access to an operator in the country you're calling. For example: if you wanted to speak to a British operator you would dial 900-990044. The operator can connect you to the number you require and accept payment for the call with a credit or debit card. A word of warning though, the service can be expensive, particularly when making collect, or reverse charge calls. In the past decade, telephone services have improved enormously both in terms of quality of service and value for money. Most faults are fixed within 24 hours and the installation of a telephone today takes no longer than a few days at most. If you buy a resale property, the phone will already be installed and you will need to transfer it to your name. You can do this by attending one of Telefonica's offices, which are located in most towns or telephone them on 1004. There is usually English speaking staff available to help.

It's quite common for owners to run up huge bills prior to their departure, simply by not canceling their telephone. The first you know of it is when you receive an unpleasant bill from Telefonica. Explaining the situation will get you nowhere. It will either be paid, or you will be "cut off". In truth, this conduct from those who are normally fellow countrymen is somewhat underhanded but perhaps not surprising. If you buy a resale property it will benefit you to encourage the seller to use the same lawyer as you intend to. If they leave you with debt, your lawyer can deduct it from the 10 per he must retain by law which is intended to cover part of the CGT which must be paid on the sale of all property. The best way to deal with this problem is to seek assurance from your lawyer that the account is clear before he allows it to be transferred to your name.

As Telefonica is a utility, it cannot put a charge on your property for an unpaid bill, even if it's yours. All it can do is suspend you from its service.

In Spain, telephones come in all shapes and sizes, all colours and with every feature you could possibly require. UK telephones work in Spain but you will need to change the plug. This is not at all difficult as both telephone plugs and the crimping tool necessary, are sold in most of the numerous hardware shops. You can also buy "gender bender" plugs which convert one to the other.

With the rapid development of world wide communications throughout the world via the internet it is difficult to keep up with the latest gizmo. At this moment however ADSL broadband is the thing to have, as in the UK there are a number of companies offering the service. Once installed you can benefit from the various VOIP software systems allowing access to free phone calls to land lines all over the world.

ADSL Broadband is available in most major towns in Spain. If you have it and want to watch your favourite TV shows then this facility is available.

### **Telephone costs**

For those intending to move permanently to Spain or spend a considerable part of their time in the country, one of the first subjects to be broached concerns either the telephone, internet or both. Are they reliable, what is the quality of the service, how much do they cost? On the question of cost, in relative terms, prices in Spain have not moved much over the past 12 months but with the pound having lost 23 cents to the Euro in the same period, the simple fact of the matter is for the Brits, prices are rising steeply.

Spain is now almost completely equipped with digital exchanges and the days of communication being available every third day and never when it rains are a thing of the past. Even faults are dealt with almost immediately and rarely take more than a day or two to rectify. The situation inland whilst better, is still quite dreadful in some places, with communication not available at all. Whilst the cost of a telephone installation is similar to that in the UK and will cost you around 150 Euros - £100 sterling, the cost of calls in Spain are among the highest in the EU. With the breaking of the Telefonica monopoly in 1998, call charges did reduce (and still are reducing). However, despite its many useful applications, the telephone in Spain should still be considered a luxury.

Single line rental cost is about 10 Euros per month plus VAT of 16 per cent. If you are disabled, over 65 with an income below the minimum pension you may be entitled to a reduced tariff and a certain amount of free calls. As mentioned, there are six communication carriers at the present moment and all compete fiercely for your business. Or at least, they think they do! You can save money by shopping around, choosing the company or companies with the lowest rates depending on the type of call you wish to make. At the moment, Telefonica is the only company able to offer local calls, although others will be offering them as soon as they are permitted to do so. The rate at which tariffs change preclude a summary of them here but as a rule of thumb if you accept that charges in Spain are just slightly higher than in the UK, apart from international calls which are two or three times higher, you'll have an idea of what call charges are.

If you really want to know to the penny what phone call charges are, then visit [www.calcutel.com](http://www.calcutel.com) Here you will be able to compare the prices of all Spanish communication companies for a given call at a certain time. Needless to say, the site is in Spanish but if you visit [www.altavisata.com](http://www.altavisata.com) you can translate the web pages into English. Do bear in mind that Spanish marketing is very different from that which you may be used to. Don't be surprised if you are offered a bargain rate for your calls and following "signing up" find that the prices increase almost immediately and considerably. The assumption is that you will not check your call rate - something you need to do constantly

Finally, whilst communications in Spain leave a lot to be desired, they are improving constantly but when it comes to competitive pricing, none of the main players seem inclined to take this route. There are various fringe companies offering low charges but these constantly change so the best advice we can offer at the moment is to look around and to see for yourself just what is available.

## **Computers**

Most people experience computers in some way or another during their lives, be it professionally or for reasons of entertainment. There can be few homes in the UK without a computer and among foreigners in Spain it will be unusual to find a home which does not have a computer connected to the internet.

Many expatriates are connected not only by dial up modems but broadband ADSL and satellite links. At this moment however ADSL broadband is the thing to have, as in the UK there are a number of companies offering the service. Once installed you can benefit from the various VOIP software systems allowing access to free phone calls to land lines all over the world.

Adsl Broadband is available in most major towns in Spain. If you have it and want to watch your favourite TV shows then this facility is available.

It is quite surprising at how many people purchase property in Spain and become horrified when they find that Telefonica have no plans for laying telephone cables in their area. Many of these people have received categorical assurances that telephones will be available when this was not the case. For such people mobile phones may have to suffice and if the internet is required the only alternative is for an expensive satellite link.

Your personal computer can not only keep you in touch with family, and friends anywhere in the world but it can act as a source of information and prove useful to most people during their first few months in Spain. It can even help you to learn Spanish, using any of the many excellent language programs available.

If, as is probably the case, you have a computer in the UK or ROI, you can safely take it with you to Spain, where after you change the mains plug, it will function as before. If you are transporting your machine to Spain, it goes without saying that it must be carefully packed. This applies equally to monitors. Printers, such as Epson and similar models with fixed print heads, should not have their ink cartridges removed. This allows the heads to dry and may render them inoperative requiring a head replacement. It will also waste the remaining ink, as seldom will a used cartridge re-prime when put back into a printer.

If the cartridges are left in place, you should ensure that the printer remains in an upright position to prevent the ink from escaping through the cartridge air holes. You should commission your computer and printer as soon as possible following your arrival in Spain. Computers cost more in Spain than is the case in the UK and most EU countries. Further, they are sold with Spanish operating systems which is not entirely unreasonable. If you ask them, you will find that very few Spanish computer retailers stock or sell English or American language versions of the Windows operating system. Not because it is not available but simply because they may not speak English and be able to support your machine. However, what most don't seem to realise is that the Windows operating system disk contains several languages versions. When installing, instead of allowing the default settings to determine the language, select English instead.

When it comes to support, don't expect much, if any. Interest in you as a client would evaporate long before your cheque had cleared were it not for the fact that most transactions are in either cash or debit card.

In Alicante, PC World has opened a very useful branch of their UK business calling it PC City. If you are in this area you will be able to purchase the same type of machines which they sell in the UK. This of course means that you will not only be able to read the instructions but the machine you buy will already have been configured with the English language operating system.

The English press in Spain is full of advertisement from people, mostly expatriates, who service, sell, build, repair, break, lose, steal and ruin computers and all of whom claim to be able to help you with your computer problem. Some offer very basic services, such as connecting you to the Internet and showing you how to use email, whilst others claim to be able to upgrade, repair and install. In short, some can and some can't! If you are not reasonably computer literate it may well be difficult to know just who can help you.

There are a number of computer shops in Spain run by expatriates and obviously they carry computer programs and operating systems which use English or American as their language. They sell computers, carry out repairs and generally have available a reasonable stock of spares should you be able and minded to look after your own machine. The fact that they are fellow countryman seems to have little effect on their prices, which often are quite high. Further, some of these shops are run by people with little or no previous experience and only the fact that complaining in Spain is so difficult, keeps them in business. Of course, there are a considerable number of competent repairmen but nowhere near the amount you would find in the UK or with anywhere near the skills.

Wherever expatriates gather, clubs representing their interests develop. Some don't last to the second meeting but computer clubs have proved to be quite resilient. If you attend a few meetings, not only will you be able to learn how to use your computer but how to look after it as well. Importantly, computer clubs are a well informed source of information regarding the location of competent technicians and reasonably priced components. Although digital cameras can be very expensive, there are now many available which are reasonably priced and quite functional.

Using a digital camera you can take photographs and store them on your computer either to print on photographic quality paper or to send home to relations or friends via email. Of course, with your computer you can also receive digital images.

With a digital camera and computer, you really are in touch with everyone. Some digital cameras offer the facility to record a few minutes video but be aware that 20 seconds of video, even when compressed, may run to 4 - 6 mb and take up to 30 minutes, perhaps even longer, to both transmit and receive. Of course, if you have ADSL then the times are significantly shorter.

## **Mobile Phones**

Although the amount of land line telephones per capita in Spain is among the lowest in Europe, when it comes to mobile phones, Spain is the fastest expanding country in the EU. In the year 2001, sales of mobile telephones in Spain passed 22 million - 5 million more than fixed line telephones. Spain has three digital networks, Movistar, owned by Telefonica, Airtel, of whom Vodaphone bought into in April and the latest arrival is Amena. Coverage claimed by all three is just under 90 per cent of the population, which should not be confused with the land area. There are many parts of inland Spain where no service is available. However, all say that coverage will eventually be 98 per cent. However, this figure refers to population, not land area and as such is misleading. Particularly as Spain has a huge land area.

**Movistar** and **Airtel** both operate on GSM frequencies, which are the same as those used by Vodaphone and Cellnet in the UK and as such roaming on these networks is possible if you have a GSM phone in the UK. **Amena** operates a PCN Network using a far higher frequency. This gives better clarity but requires far more cells than GSM Networks. In the UK, Orange and One2One operate a PCN Network so phones from these companies or any PCN Network can also be used in Spain. Telephones from American Mobile networks do not work unless they are dual frequency so as to include GSM. Many foreigners, upon arrival in Spain, choose a mobile phone because the cost of connection is less than a normal house telephone and is instantaneous. If you move house, or province, you can take your phone with you and retain the same number. Further, you can use it almost anywhere in the world.

The fact that tariffs have fallen considerably over recent times will be of little interest to you other than perhaps to hope they continue to fall. As it stands, the cost of a mobile phone can still be extremely expensive, especially if you use a phone which requires prepaid cards. When using a mobile phone in Spain its worth keeping an eye on signal strength. Failed calls can run up bills at an alarming rate as they attract a full minute penalty if the called party answers. Four or five attempts to speak for 30 seconds will cost quite a lot. Prepaid cards are available in units of 5 - 50 Euros and can be purchased from a variety of sources including supermarkets, petrol stations, news agents, and machines. You can now also top up your phone directly from many of the ATM machines. You simply tell the machine the number of your mobile phone, how much you wish to credit and press the button. Your account is debited immediately and your phone bleeps to let you know the deed is done.

Although there are many different tariffs, all work out expensively and one way or another you will pay about 70 pence, perhaps more for a minute call. Only if you have a very good sense of humour and a large bank account should you contemplate the cost of calling internationally with a mobile phone on a Spanish network.

If you wish to open a monthly account with one of the network providers you will need either a residency card or to pay a deposit of about 300 Euros. The monthly fee is between 12 - 25 euros depending upon the tariff you select and the call charges are between 8 - 60 cents per minute.

When considering which phone to buy it goes without saying that you should shop around carefully. If you have a mobile phone in the UK or anywhere else in the world (Apart from the USA) come to that, if you bring it with you when you come to Spain, you can register it on the appropriate network of your choice.

If you visit Spain for the purpose of a holiday or perhaps to view property and wish to bring your mobile phone with you, it will be necessary prior to your departure to contact your air time provider and have them remove the roaming lock. If you don't do this you might be unable to use your phone in Spain. Remember, anyone calling you whilst you are abroad pays only the rate for telephoning a mobile phone in the UK. The international part of the call is paid by you. Using a cell phone abroad is an easy way of significantly reducing your bank balance.

Currently, calls from mobile to mobile are cheaper than from mobile to landline.

**If you are interested in ways of saving money on international calls, please contact us!**

### **The Internet**

Spain has been described as a Hi-Tech third world country and whilst this is not entirely reasonable, when it comes to the Internet this description is not at all inappropriate. As with so many technical advances and innovations, Spain was slow to become involved with the Internet. The high cost of local telephone calls and "thick thumb" marketing techniques by Telefonica have meant that Spain now lags far behind most countries in Europe.

However, lower prices for calls and computers have led to an upsurge of interest in the Internet but nowhere are the demands for connection to the internet stronger than among expatriates. For the foreigner living in Spain, the Internet provides a relatively cheap, effective way to keep in touch and it is rare to find an expatriate from any country who does not have a computer on line. According to those who know or claim to know - over five million emails each day pass between Spain and the UK. If you include those which are lost, the figure will be even higher!

As you would imagine, Telefonica is the largest of the ISP's (Internet Service Providers) but there are one or two other communication companies now offering connection to the Internet and rates do vary between them. There are also several other companies who provide Internet services but who are not communication companies. Effectively, they purchase lines and time from Telefonica and provide you with an Internet service for a monthly or annual fee. These services really are the remnants of those who were first into the market but were unable to keep pace with the way it changed. This type of service is probably best avoided.

There are several Internet Service Providers who offer a free service, although you do of course have to pay for the call. Telefonica is by far and away the largest of these. Needless to say, setting up an account with them requires that you be able to speak Spanish and have a four figure IQ. One organisation who provides a free, well run service is Alehop. Good connection speeds but detracting from this is the fact that as of yet they do not have pop3 mail which means that you have to use "hotmail" or a similar service.

Retevision, who own the Mobile Telephone Network Amena, offer a variety of communication services which include connection to the Internet. Their basic internet service is free, there being nothing to pay for apart from the cost of the call at local rate. Connection speeds are good and around the 40 - 48k mark. They offer unlimited email addresses, which is a useful feature for a family. Both Retevision, Telefonica and others, offer tariffs for people who wish to spend longer periods of time on the net. For 19 euros a month, both will allow you to connect for as long as you like between the hours of 8 p.m. and 8 am, and 24 hours a day during week ends and public holidays. For an additional €6 per month you can remain connected permanently.

Most of the major players now offer broadband at around €45 per month but expect this rate to fall as more customers opt for this service which is 10 times faster than the standard dial up service. An advantage to broadband is the fact that it uses the same line as your telephone and simultaneous use of both telephone and internet is possible. Be warned, if you opt for ADSL and open more ports than you should, Telefonica will not support you if and when you get problems. If you opt for 56k modem connection you may find some days that it is difficult to get onto the net or that you cannot log in to your mail server. At times, when the net is not behaving, the temptation is to phone and find out what the problem is. It is probably true to say that the net will be working long before you are able to find anyone who will be able to tell you anything which will have justified your call.

There are many ways of getting on to the net but the simple fact of the matter is that at the present time, most of the lines and cables belong to Telefonica and if there is a problem, regardless of who your ISP is, Telefonica are going to be the ones who sort it out. Obviously, if the BT experience is anything to go by then their own customers will receive preferential treatment. For this reason, at the present moment Telefonica are probably the best bet when it comes to the internet. Pick up a free cd from any of the Telefonica shops, slip it into your cd drive and it will automatically connect you to the internet.

## **Water**

The rain in Spain does not fall mainly in the plain, rather than in the Northwest and centre of Spain with shortfall along most of the coasts, Balearic and Canary islands. In fact, Spain has more than enough rainfall to meet its requirements, including those of agriculture but what it has, isn't very well distributed. In the Canaries, most water is provided by desalination plants. On the Costa del Sol, a desalination plant has been installed but has yet to be used. The Costa Blanca with its near perfect climate has yet to suffer from any form of permanent water shortages but with the ever increasing demand for this coast by foreigners, this may not always be the case.

Those who visited Spain during the early 70's will no doubt recall the notices in hotels and apartments urging them not to waste water. In those days it was not rare for holidaymaker's to be covered with soap and the water supply to fail. Today, this type of situation is not common, although there are still areas such as Almeria, where competition for water from crops is quite stiff. Crop irrigation accounts for around 80 per cent of all fresh water used. On the Costa del Sol, purification plants recycle waste water from urban areas for crop irrigation and for watering golf courses.

In many areas frequented by tourists, water shortages are particularly bad during the peak summer season when the population may increase five to ten fold. The situation is made even worse by the fact that this is the driest time of the year with the heaviest demand for water. Halfway through the 90's, the reservoirs in both southern and eastern Spain were virtually depleted. Water rationing was introduced and in some areas, the water table fell so low as to allow sea water to penetrate and pollute many of the wells in use. The situation came to an end during the winter of 95/96 when months of torrential rain caused widespread flooding throughout Spain but by 1999, drought had returned to many areas.

If you intend to purchase property in the countryside do not assume that water is either connected to it or available. In many cases it won't be and worse, never will. To live in such areas will require tanker loads of water delivered regularly and the problems with storing this amount of water and keeping it clean.

As mentioned, wastage due to poor irrigation methods consumes most water but much of what's left is lost through leaking pipes. There seems to be reluctance on behalf of the Spanish authorities to encourage conservation, particularly in the resort areas. No doubt there is reluctance to inconvenience or discourage the 60,000,000 people who visit Spain each year. Resort and coastal areas generally fare quite well in the water stakes for obvious reasons and together with their climate, make them sought after among those looking for property.

The Costa del Sol uses double the national average per person for its numerous swimming pools, lawns, gardens and golf courses and people in its various towns consume more water per person per day than any other Europeans. At the same time, hundreds of rural towns and villages have water on tap for just a few hours a day during the summer months and many farmers face bankruptcy due to the lack of water for their crops.

Again, be careful where you purchase property and do not take the word of anyone who may be selling it. Few people in this "profession" will lose a sale because of a mere "technicality"! Most will tell you exactly what you want to hear.

Even if you are careful in regard to the water situation, if you don't know what you are buying and the restrictions which may apply to the area you hope to buy in then you could well end up in an area where you are restricted to 3 cubic metres of water per month. This is equivalent to about 10 baths or 15 - 20 showers. An average family would require about 120. As for the swimming pool, be particularly careful when buying inland properties.

Remember - believe nothing - check everything. If you are told there is no problem with water, run a few taps. If you find an area or location in which you wish to live, check the reliability of the water supply over the previous five or more years. Ask anyone who you think may have information. This includes neighbours, tradesmen, Gestors, lawyers etc. In most towns, water supplies are adequate but there may be cuts of varying length during the summer months.

If you intend to buy an inland property, such as a finca or other type of remote building, there are many things you need to check. Is water available? From where? Does it last all year round? If not are there alternative supplies? These, and the answers to many other questions you must have before you commit yourself to buying a property. Without an adequate supply of water you have absolutely nothing.

The cost of water has risen dramatically in Spain in recent years and in some areas, water bills have increased by as much as 350 per cent. During 2002, the authorities gave notice that water charges were to rise by 10 per cent per annum over the next 10 years in order to be able to provide the facilities required by ever increasing amounts of users. Whether or not, this amount will prove to be adequate remains to be seen.

Water charges vary from an average of around 72 cents per cubic metre on the mainland to between €1.90 - 3.00 per cubic metre in the Canaries and some parts of the Balearics, where it is delivered by truck. If water is supplied from a desalination plant, the cost will be high and whilst drinkable and safe, the taste may be quite unpleasant. Spanish water from the mains is safe to drink in all areas although the quality may be poor in some. On the Costa Blanca, water is clean and pure but from time to time the taste may leave something to be desired. In fact, it can leave a lot to be desired. If you do not like the taste the answer is simple - bottled water, of which there are over 3,000 million litres consumed each year in Spain.

When it comes to water filters, these have a definite role to play in some areas. Forget about the types which have to be plumbed in and require expensive cartridge replacements on a regular basis. Instead, go for the very simple ones. These usually consist of two plastic containers which fit together and you simply tip water into the top one which quickly filters through to the bottom one. All taste is removed and enough water can be produced this way for a family of four. Obviously this only applies to drinking and cooking.

It may be worth contacting one of the leading local expatriate water and plumbing specialist, [www.100percentplumbing.com](http://www.100percentplumbing.com) for advice on ro2 units, water softeners, air conditioning, solar systems and the like.

## **GAS**

Unlike countries of northern Europe, in Spain, mains gas exists only in major cities. If you are moving to a major city in Spain and mains gas is available, you simply make application to the appropriate utility company for a supply. If mains gas is not available the only alternative available to you is bottled gas. Don't worry about the cost, in Spain, bottled gas is about half the price of mains gas in northern Europe. Further, supplies are plentiful and regular. However, you do need to keep an eye on your usage and ensure that you always have bottles in reserve. Failure to do so may result in you having to take a cold shower or not being able to do the washing until supplies have been replenished.

Well worth the money, is having an automatic manifold installed if you intend to heat water by gas. These simple devices simply detect when one bottle of gas has run out and switch immediately to another. This means that you don't have to constantly check your gas bottles so as to be able to change them over without the boiler pilot light going out.

Further, the manifold indicates which bottle is being used so you know if one has been depleted and requires changing. Without an automatic manifold, expect the water to run cold every now and again - usually, whilst you are under the shower.

For heating water and cooking, butane or bottled gas is far cheaper than electricity. For this reason, many people run as many gas appliances as possible in order to reduce their consumption of electricity. If you heat water by electricity it will cost you about twice as much as heating it by gas. The same can be said for using an electric cooker as opposed to a gas one. This being the case, most people opt for a four ring gas hob and an electric oven. With no dependency upon either gas or electricity, a hot meal is always going to be possible.

If you cook by gas, using the above combination, a 12.5 kg container of gas will last somewhere between 3 and 6 months. This includes boiling water for tea and coffee etc. using a kettle heated by gas. If you use a gas hot water heater, a family of four will use between one and two bottles per month. In the summer months, gas can last 2 or 3 times as long due to the raised temperature in the water main. Gas is supplied by two companies, Repsol and Cepsa. You will need a contract with either if you are to be supplied with gas and currently, the price which is fixed by the government is 8 Euros plus a few cents per bottle. Price fluctuates constantly and can go down to just under 6 Euros.

Be careful when you apply for a contract. For insurance purposes it will be necessary for the supplier to visit your premises in order to ascertain that the equipment you intend to use is safe. There is no charge for this inspection, being a requirement under law as well as a requirement of the insurance companies. Notwithstanding this, it is quite common for employees of either of the gas companies to submit an account and ask for money either for the inspection or as premium for a non-existent insurance. €30 is common. Don't pay it. There may be a charge in some parts of Spain for the initial visit to check that everything is OK but should this be the case it will be made clear prior to the visit and well supported with the appropriate official documentation. Further, an official receipt will be issued which can be verified.

Despite these regular attempts at fraud, no one seems to be brought to task and the same employees wend their way around the new customers.

Repsol supply butane in bright red steel containers which are extremely heavy. Your first bottle will cost 27 Euros which consists of a 18 Euros deposit and a charge for the gas of just over 8 euros. Thereafter, you simply swap an empty container for a full one and pay the going rate. Bear in mind that you always need one bottle as a spare for each gas appliance. Repsol have regular gas deliveries which in many places are every other working day.

Cepsa, also one of Spain's petrol companies, also supply butane but they supply it in lightweight stainless steel containers. Their terms of business are identical to Repsol but in addition to regular deliveries, Cepsa also sell butane on the forecourts of their own garages ensuring that you really never need run out. Recently, they have also started to make it available through hardware shops.

We mentioned above the situation regarding bogus demands for money relating to services and or insurances premiums. In fact, this scam is spreading and it is not at all uncommon now for bogus butane representatives to call unannounced to inspect gas appliances. They usually carry some form of identification, which may or may not be genuine. Their modus is to inspect gas appliances and condemn pipes and regulators as not being safe. For an extortionate fee they will replace them. Gas pipes are bright orange and have the date of expiry written every few centimetres in black, bold print. You can obtain replacements at most hardware stores and some of the bigger department stores. The same goes for regulators. If you are visited by these people, smile and politely decline their services.

If the idea of dragging bottles of gas around does not appeal, you could consider the installation of a bulk propane tank. This would entail filling once a year but frankly, the cost of the installation does not justify the slight amount of work involved. They also take up space in your garden and are quite unsightly. Providing you have enough bottles so as to be able to have a healthy reserve there really is no problem with changing them as and when required.

When you first apply for a gas contract you will need to decide how many bottles that you require. You will have to pay a deposit of around €18 per bottle. If you decide to return your bottles you will only receive €5 for them. It's not worth asking why - nobody knows or has ever found out.

For this reason, most people sell their bottles to other users at a more realistic price. Only in Spain could there be a black market in empty gas bottles!

Gas heaters of the Calor type are very popular in Spain but they can be extremely dangerous. Deaths through asphyxiation are not uncommon during the winter months and if you use this type of heater you must ensure that adequate, *which means plenty*, of ventilation is available.

## **Electricity**

The majority of Electricity in Spain is supplied at 230 volts AC with a frequency of 50 cycles per second. This means that if you come from the UK, ROI and many other EU countries, electrical appliances purchased in these countries will work perfectly well. Be advised however that there are a few places left where power is supplied at 110 volts and sometimes both 110 and 220 volts are available in the same building. Spanish electricity is said to be expensive in comparison to the price charged by other EU countries. In fact it costs 9 cents per unit or 6.3p Sterling. There are however standing and other charges which can soon run up your bills and overall it definitely pays not to waste electricity. In actual fact, the cost of electricity in the various Spanish regions differs slightly. The reason for this concerns the four main players who supply Spain's electricity. All are monopolies in their own areas and the prices they charge reflect this fact. The government has been muttering about the need for much needed competition but as of yet, it has not arrived.

If you buy a property in Spain from a competent company or agency, when it comes to arranging contracts with the various utility companies, you will find that the majority of work will have been done for you and everything is ready for you to simply move into your new home. In the event that you wish to do this yourself, the following applies. Immediately after buying a property, you must sign a contract with the local electricity company. To do this you will have to visit the appropriate office to register and pay the appropriate fee. You will need your passport for identification and someone to talk to as you are likely to be queuing for several hours. If you are buying a resale property you must ensure that all of the previous accounts have been paid and the meter has been read. If you don't, you will pay the bills for the previous owners, or be sitting in the dark.

A point to remember is that unpaid electricity bills cannot be attached or charged to your property nor can bills from other utility companies. However, whether you ran them up or someone else did, if they remain unpaid you will soon lose your service and have much anguish ahead of you as you battle with Spanish bureaucracy.

The cost of an electricity connection, which should also include the price of the meter, is usually in the region of 90 - 220 euros. This varies according to location and the type of supply required. If you are inland and the mains have to be run 1 or 2 km the price could be enormous or even prohibitive. It is not really practical to think in terms of running pylons for miles in order that your recently acquired finca can have light at night!

Note: If you buy a condominium or other type of community property, the price of connection to all utility services is included in the cost of the property by law. You still pay it - but in a different way.

As with buying any inland property, believe nothing and check everything you are told by property company employees or Estate Agents. Many an inland property purchased several years ago is still in the dark despite definite assurances given at the time regarding the supply of electricity. Although nowhere near as bad as it was a few short years ago, Spain still suffers from power cuts. Particularly during thunder storms, or strong winds. Power can fail for a fraction of a second, which is enough to crash, or re-boot a computer, or for an hour or longer.

Many of the power cuts experienced in Spain are not the responsibility of the generating companies but those of the owners. Electricity is supplied on the basis of a sliding standing charge which is determined by the power made available to you and which in theory you should be able to draw at any time. For instance, if you own an apartment, you will find that a power supply of 3.5 kw is more than adequate. A large villa may require 7.5 kw, the supply of which costs more than a smaller supply. With this in mind, many upon arrival in Spain simply ask for a

small supply because its cheaper. As soon as they attempt to draw more power than they have contracted for, their power supply fails. Many struggle on for months or longer before they realise what the problem is. Pay for what you need, in the long run it makes for a much easier life.

In relation to the robust UK three pin plug complete with onboard fuses, plugs in Spain are an exercise in faith and character building. It is quite common for rooms, even kitchens, to only have one power point. For this reason adapter plugs and extension cables are available from numerous types of shops. Spanish plugs come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The smaller two pin plugs are not earthed. These are for running items such as table lamps and other low wattage devices. Where an item is not earthed it should be double insulated.

Many times this is not the case and the risk from electric shock is very real. You may well find that plug sockets have been installed at strange angles, requiring the plugs to be operated on their sides. However, regardless of how strange you find the system or if you are an electrician, how dangerous, the fact is you take it, warts and all or you leave it. Modern houses in Spain are equipped with earth leakage trips which ensure that in the event of a fault, you will be protected. If you don't have this protection ensure that you do not connect metal lamps to non-earthed plugs. Computers are also better earthed, both as a protection to the equipment and to yourself.

On the subject of computers, lap tops with their own batteries or computers with uninterruptible power supplies are by far the best method of using a computer in Spain. Spikes through the mains, can constantly reboot your machine, making its use impossible for a time. This may cause your machine to lose information or even suffer damage. Protecting the power supply will obviate these risks.

In many cases, there will be no need to replace UK plugs on your appliances as a superb range of adapter plugs exist in Spain which are both functional and safe. They are also quite cheap at just over £1 per plug.

Light bulbs in Spain are ES ( Edison Screw) and the bayonet type fitting used in the UK will be of no use to you. Remember this if you intend to bring lamps and lighting with you. Whilst many do, they have to import their light bulbs or rely on others to bring them out from the UK. Energy saving lighting is becoming extremely popular in Spain. Initially expensive to buy, 11 watts of consumed power produces about 70 watts of lighting which soon repays the extra cost of the light.

Electricity is billed every two months following your meter having been read. However, it is totally legal for the electricity companies to estimate your power usage every second period. You should always read your own meter in order to avoid being overcharged. That is if you can get at it. Many are now locked away in steel boxes in an attempt to prevent people from stealing electricity or trying to turn their meters back.