

# Sol talk

DECEMBER 2006

ISSUE 63

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# A real cliffhanger

*New Yorker Mike DeSimone, who also has a house in Nerja, recounts a truly terrifying trip to the beach*

We have been so looking forward to this particular trip to our house, first because we will be here for two full weeks, but most importantly because we will be in our home alone. On Sunday, our first full day in town, we took a drive east on the coast road to the beach just over the border with Granada. We had emailed Lucas and Ricardo, two friends from New York who recently sold their apartment there and moved full-time into their house here, and asked if they wanted to join us at the beach on Sunday.

Their reply was a strongly worded, “No!” They claimed that the dirt road to the beach, which winds down through the tree-filled natural park is too crowded and too dangerous to be driven on the weekend. It is also just a few days after a major Spanish holiday, *El Noche de San Juan*, and all of our other Spanish friends are still out of town. Our trip to the beach, like the two weeks in our house, will be made alone.

Driving down the precipitous dirt road, we notice that cars are parked along both sides, and we’re still a good way from the beach. As we round an S-shaped curve with mountain on the left and cliff on the right, a woman walks toward us, waving her arms, shouting, “*Bloqueado! No Aparcamiento!*” which translates as, “It’s blocked! No Parking!” In truth, neither one of us really remembers if this was yelled in Spanish or in English, but that is beside the point.

The woman wears a look of anger on her face, and she is followed by a white van, transmission in reverse, backing up this treacherous, winding hill. She gestures at us to move over, to our right, towards the cliff, and Jeff, in the driver’s seat, complies. The van is upon us, it’s going to be close, and Jeff turns the wheel to the right—in the direction of the cliff—and inches forward a bit.

Feeling the right front side of the car dip a little, I become alarmed, so I look over at Jeff and warn him, “Don’t go over any farther.” Now the driver of the van, moving slowly in reverse, is yelling too, and against my advice, Jeff angles the rented white hatchback right and forward, and I am compelled to repeat, “Don’t go over any farther.” I feel a mild lean to the right, but the van is past, and I spot a parking space maybe twenty feet beyond and to the left, so all we have to do is back up a little, move the car to that space there, and everything will be alright.

Suddenly, amid a cloud of dust, a small white ice truck comes uphill, also backwards, and the left edge of the car is directly in its path. Before I have time to say anything, Jeff tucks in the side mirror, shifts into first, steers just a bit to the right, and gently accelerates. The truck passes us, back end first, as I realize that the right-sided tilt of the car now extends from the headlight all the way to the taillight. We are now parked directly behind a bright green Fiat, on a curve, at the edge of a cliff, and my left shoulder is distinctly higher than my right. I don’t want to say it—I don’t—the last words you speak should not be “I told you so,” but I look over at Jeff and remind him, “I said, ‘Don’t go over any farther!’”

He has that look in his eyes which I call his stressed look. His eyes are just slightly narrowed, and he couldn’t focus them on anything if he tried. He doesn’t respond to my statement, he just turns and says, “Open your door and see how close we are to the edge.”

Against my better judgment, because anything could tip this car, I obey, and when I open the door, I am terrified. My left hand firmly gripping the edge of my seat, I duck to the right a little, and peer under my open door, and then turn to look towards the rear. A good two to three inches of both the front and the back tires are hanging over the edge, and after an almost straight drop down of thirty or

forty feet, the limestone cliff abruptly becomes a rocky slope which ends another hundred feet below in a jagged, boulder filled ravine.

Once I had ever so gently closed the door, I don’t know how long we sat there, but we had a whole conversation about just how we were planning to safely get out of that car. The Spanish compact was too tight for me to squeeze between Jeff and the steering wheel, to climb out his door to safety, but we were pretty certain that if he got out of the car first, the sudden shift in weight would cause it to tumble, and it would be bye-bye for me.

There didn’t seem to be a good way out of this, and I’m not sure if I thought we could think more clearly with higher blood sugar or if I didn’t want to die with an empty stomach, but I carefully reached into the back seat and unzipped our little black soft-sided lunch box, out of which I removed two chorizo and manchego sandwiches. Really. When in doubt, eat.

I will forever contend that any statement which ends with the words, “Let’s just see what happens,” is an act of desperation, not an emergency plan, but, high on bread, cheese, and spiced pork, Jeff decided that since we couldn’t go forward, we would have to go backward. It took a little convincing, but somehow I agreed with his plan: “I’m going to put it into reverse, gun it, and let’s just see what happens.”

The next few seconds went by so quickly it’s impossible to say with any certainty what we were able to see, but what happened is this: Jeff put the car into reverse, Jeff gunned the engine, and the car moved backwards. We had good traction on all four wheels, we were picking up speed, and then we hit the tree. We didn’t know we hit the tree, because we didn’t see the tree. All we knew was this: The white Ibiza, which had up to that moment been cooperating very nicely, took a ninety degree turn and plunged over the cliff. Neither one of us remembers his life flashing before his eyes, and nobody soiled their pants, but as we gathered momentum and dove towards the bottom of that boulder-strewn ravine, we heard a thud, and the car came to a complete halt.

I hastily told Jeff to shut the engine, grab the keys, and ditch out of the now-still car. He opened his door, I opened mine, and we simultaneously barreled out to the sides and then slid down the dusty hill.

Covered with chalk, we both looked up and saw, to our amazement, that our auto had come to rest squarely in the center of an enormous upturned boulder. A little to the left or a little to the right, and we would have clipped the giant rock and slowly tumbled to a horrifying death. Grabbing onto scraggly roots and scrubby pines, we clawed our way back up to the dirt road, to find that our accident had been witnessed by no one. Moments later, an old man on a motorbike with a milk crate tied to the back stopped, took one look at the two of us, our shorts and tee shirts covered with dust, and a further look at the car beyond and below, and silently shook his head and made the sign of the cross before pressing on.

Glad to be alive, we figured that the worst thing that could happen now is that they charge us for the car. Oddly enough, on Saturday, I waited in the airport with the luggage while Jeff picked up our rental, and when he returned to me with the contract and the key, the first thing he said was, “Don’t be mad at me—I got the extra insurance.” We usually don’t, because supposedly our credit card takes care of all that, but at a euro a day, it was hardly worth getting mad about. So at that point, we were okay, and the car would be taken care of, but we were still a little freaked out.

After risking my life to slide back down the cliff to retrieve our house keys and the auto rental contract from the plastic pocket in the door of the car, we continued onward to the first beach bar, where we would ask to make a call. There is no cell service at this beach, so we hadn't even bothered to bring our phone. On the way down, we encountered two park rangers, in an official *Junta de Andalucia* Jeep, and we tried to explain, in Spanish, the concept of the car going over the cliff, but the best we could do is, "The car is down there, and the road is up here." Understanding but not really caring, the ranger shrugged and told us to call a tow truck, or *grua*.

When we arrived at the bar, sweat now leaking through our fresh coating of grey dust, we again explained our predicament, this time to the bar owner and his wife. Although this sort of thing seemed to be a regular occurrence around here, the petite Spanish woman crossed herself when we got to the part about the boulder, exclaiming, "*Gracias a Dio, y gracias a San Pedro.*" *San Pedro*, or Saint Peter, is the biblical rock, and we had God and Saint Peter to thank for the miracle of the rock. She told us that when we return, we must light a candle to Saint Peter at the now-holy site of our near death experience.

After she was finished speaking, the owner told us that his house was our house, and he immediately offered us a drink. Wanting one badly, but terrified of a blood alcohol test or something of the sort, we declined, asking instead to use the phone. Jeff was doing fine until he got to the part where he had to describe to the woman at the car rental agency where we were, so he put the waiter on the phone, and apparently all was made clear when he said the words "*playa naturista.*"

Jeff had been happily giving hints on the order of "First beach in Granada," and "Right at the green sign," but he forgot to mention that this is known locally as the nude beach. Never mind the fact that this is one of the most beautiful beaches for miles around, with no further building allowed inside the natural park; to the tow truck driver, it was going to be the nude beach. On a beautiful Sunday afternoon, when he could be spending time with his family, he had to drive to the beach in order to rescue the nature-loving Americans who don't even know how to drive!

While waiting for the tow truck to arrive, we drank salty, naturally carbonated mineral water and forced down a plate of scrambled eggs with mushrooms and jamon Serrano. The sun was out in full force, but we remained in the restaurant, wanting to appear contrite when the driver finally arrived. As we moved on to a plate of tiny fried calamari, Jeff asked me, quite seriously, "Is this real? Did we just die in that car? Could we be dead?"

Pinching the flesh on his right forearm between the fingers of my left hand—I held a fork in my right—I replied, "We are sitting in a beach bar on a bright, sunny day eating delicious tapas. Except for the lack of wine, if this isn't paradise, I don't know what is. If this is heaven, bring it on!"

After about two hours, the phone in the restaurant rang, and the waiter told us to go back up to the car. As we got closer, we saw that traffic was blocked in both directions—nobody could get up and nobody could get down—due to a large, flatbed truck, with, at the end of a winch, front wheels still hanging over the cliff, our car. The driver asked us where we had been, and we informed him that we had been instructed to wait at the restaurant until he called. Now that we were here, we were expected to help, and the tow truck operator put webbed strips through the wheels, and me, Jeff, and about ten other men pulled the car back up and over. For a car that had been over the cliff and back, it looked pretty good, and it was even still drivable. After our Ibiza was safely chained to the base of the flatbed, we signed a contract, and were given the keys to a bright red Hyundai. We immediately nick-named it *The Scarlet Letter*, and the first place we drove it was down to the beach for a drink

The story is a chapter from Mike DeSimone's book, *Between the Mountains and the Sea*.

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**Haveli**

## Boxing Day Bash

in the Haveli Red Pavilion

26th December from 20.30 hours

Indian Buffet - €15

Live Music with

Cantando & Co.

Music charge €5 per head

Main Restaurant

a la carte as usual from 19.00 hours



## New Years Eve Menu

in the Haveli Main Restaurant

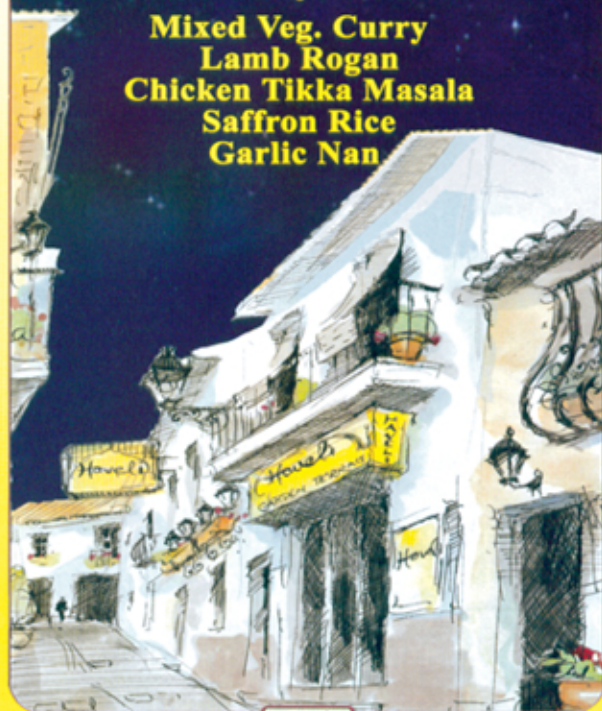
from 19.00 Hours

Adults €35 • Children €18

Papadam & Pickles

Platter of Onion Bhaji,  
Meat Samosa & Mixed Tikka

Mixed Veg. Curry  
Lamb Rogan  
Chicken Tikka Masala  
Saffron Rice  
Garlic Nan



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