

La Gomera

Every early December, a sweet morning chorus of bleats returns. The goats start having their kids then and more are born each day, swelling the chorus. We wake to this lovely sound. It is the pre-Christmas soundtrack in rural La Gomera.

Most of the island's villages have a sizeable goat population. There are no paddocks or fields, so this other island population is not immediately visible to the casual observer. All the lower lying, steeply terraced land has traditionally been used for agriculture, not grazing. The goats may not be in view, but they are very much there.

Look into any of the tumble down stone sheds or patchwork wood and pallet shacks, or peep into ruins roofed with corrugated tin, and what do you find? Chickens, a few ducks, the occasional sleepy donkey and a veritable multitude of brown, black, grey and white goats. This stabled goat population is largely female, kept close to home for the rich milk, then used to make local white cheese.

It is the young of these goats who are responsible for our December sound track. Their complex bleat language overlaps with human morning conversations, sometimes hilariously. Serious dialogue is, thankfully, impossible when all pronouncements of intent or ire are met with a perfectly timed 'baaaaaaa'.

Then there are hundreds of other goats, left to wander and graze so much higher up on the steep cliff faces that their owners keep track of them with binoculars. We rarely see them, apart from as an occasional flash of colour on rock faces, but we can hear them too as they go about their business.

Their morning and evening migrations along precipitous tracks send down peals of little bells on the breeze.

The male kids down in the valleys are happily unaware of their fate. Their lives will be short and sweet, ending shortly before December the twenty-fourth, when Canarians will get together with their extended families to celebrate Christmas on Noche Buena.

Preparations for the event start early in the morning, when ovens and stoves are lit. As day breaks, the smell of woodsmoke wafts everywhere. A bluish smoke haze thins on the cool air.

Huge saucepans are put on to boil water while the ovens fire up. Lots of it is needed to cook the traditional Christmas dinner's other main ingredient, the yam.

Yams are dense roots, shaped like long, tubular potatoes. They can weigh more than five kilos and are roughly the size and shape of a chocolate Yule log, but two to three times heavier. Yams need lots of moisture for their slow growth and their large, distinctively shaped leaves are to be found wherever there are damp corners. Dark green, heart-shaped leaves nod in the breeze beside irrigation channels and watercourses all over the island, and the heavy roots are ready to eat in December, after long hours of slow boiling in



Neighbours and friends new and old get together to sing and celebrate

GOATS AND YAMS FOR CHRISTMAS

Goats and yams and many friends

□ By Barbara Belt

water. Eaten with spicy red mojo sauce, they are delicious.

The slaughtered kids are cooked slowly, either jointed in wood ovens or diced and simmered in sauce in enormous saucepans. As the afternoon wears on, the delicious smell of this tender meat slowly cooking in its juices and sauce, and the yams softening to perfection in spiced water, distract one from the serious business of feeling sorry for the kids and their distraught mothers. All the meat and fish we eat has been killed for our pleasure, but we are usually spared the reality, which we like to forget.

At about nine o'clock, the feast is ready to serve and everyone gathers, not necessarily round the table and not necessarily at the same time. This is a far more casual affair than an English Christmas dinner. The vast spread of food does, in the end, all get eaten and an unbelievable quantity of wines and liqueurs disappear and are replenished as if by magic. Conversation and argument takes place, sometimes to the accompaniment of guitars and small timples playing villancicos, or carols and Canarian standards. Sometimes everyone sings.

This is all a slow process, involving place changing and changes of personnel when sudden missions to go off to do something, or show somebody something, become crucial. Promises to be back in five minutes are ignored and then forgotten with the arrival of new guests, who have in turn gone temporarily absent with leave from their family Noche Buena tables.

As the festivities proceed, forgot-

ten, earlier absentees re-arrive, and are persuaded to eat and drink again, despite having had at least three dinners here and elsewhere. The whole party may, or may not, disappear to midnight mass, the Misa de Gallo, (the cockerel mass), reappearing a few hours later, with more new faces.

Both returning family and guests and new guests are welcomed and brought up to date on all fronts. An endless supply of food and drink arrives at the table.

Phone calls to and from relatives and friends on other islands and Venezuela punctuate the proceedings. You may find yourself in deep telephone discussion with an unknown, but charming, ex neighbour in Caracas.

Throughout the proceedings, children and grannies nod off in chairs, wake up and start again. Nobody would dream of putting anyone to bed. Just as all seems to be winding down, there may well be a visit from more friends bearing musical instruments.

The Gomeros have a reputation throughout the islands of being keen on their music. The Canarian joke, 'what happens if you put more than seven Gomeros together?...a music band', reflects this stereotype. And away we go again, fuelled by more food and wine. Everyone sings if they still can and bangs something if they can't.

Much, much later, coffee and mistela close the proceedings.

The mistela is homemade, delicious and potent. Cinnamon, orange and other closely guarded secret ingredients are added to a bottle of spirits

a few months before Noche Buena and left to mature, to wonderful effect. No two mistelas are the same and much is made of savouring this year's batch before the long leave-taking begins. Should new guests arrive at this point, it is quite possible that the party will revive and go on for hours longer. Hospitality is of the essence and until the place is in darkness and the hosts are finally asleep in bed, all guests will be enthusiastically welcomed and pressed to eat and drink.

Considerable staying power, a well-developed capacity for consumption and lots of bonhomie are the necessary attributes for enjoying these wonderful goat and yam Canarian Christmas celebrations. The same attributes, incidentally, will ensure that the Christmas communication miracle takes place.

Those who arrive at the Noche Buena dinner speaking little Spanish will realise, at approximately two fifteen in the morning, that something extraordinary has happened. They have been vigorously arguing the case for something-possibly now forgotten but still compellingly interesting to everyone-for some time now in Spanish! Their hosts and local friends will, at about the same time, realise that yes! of course!... they can indeed speak English.

This will be enormously exciting, calling for a celebratory round of toast making in the new languages and a bout of singing, where all the English speakers, both practised and newly discovered, will sing Beatles songs, followed by a rendition of Guantanamo, the Spanish song everyone knows the chorus of.

Fuerteventura

Discount scheme extended

Ryanair return confirmed

● The return of Ryanair to Fuerteventura almost a year after it controversially pulled out of the island was confirmed at a press conference in Puerto del Rosario.

The Dublin-based low cost airline announced several routes, including flights from Ireland, Italy and Belgium. The formal announcement came a few weeks after a deal was reached with the local authorities and an influential business grouping, ending the bitter passenger subsidy dispute triggered at the end of 2008.

According to the company's website, they will return to Fuerteventura "with 10 new routes from March 2010", adding that the decision was taken after the "local government" extended the airport discount scheme.

They confirmed that they will operate 10 Fuerteventura routes from March 2010 to/from Bournemouth, Brussels (Charleroi), Dublin, Dusseldorf (Weeze), Frankfurt (Hahn), Glasgow (Prestwick), Liverpool, Madrid, Milan (Bergamo) and Pisa, creating, they state 300 new jobs in Fuerteventura.

Speaking in Fuerteventura following the announcement, Ryanair's Michael Cawley said, "we commend the local government's decision to protect its vital tourism industry, jobs and the Canary Island economy with the extension of the hugely successful airport charges discount scheme."

We are confident that in the current climate of reduced traffic and tourism in Spain the Spanish Government will see the wisdom of extending low airport costs throughout Spain."