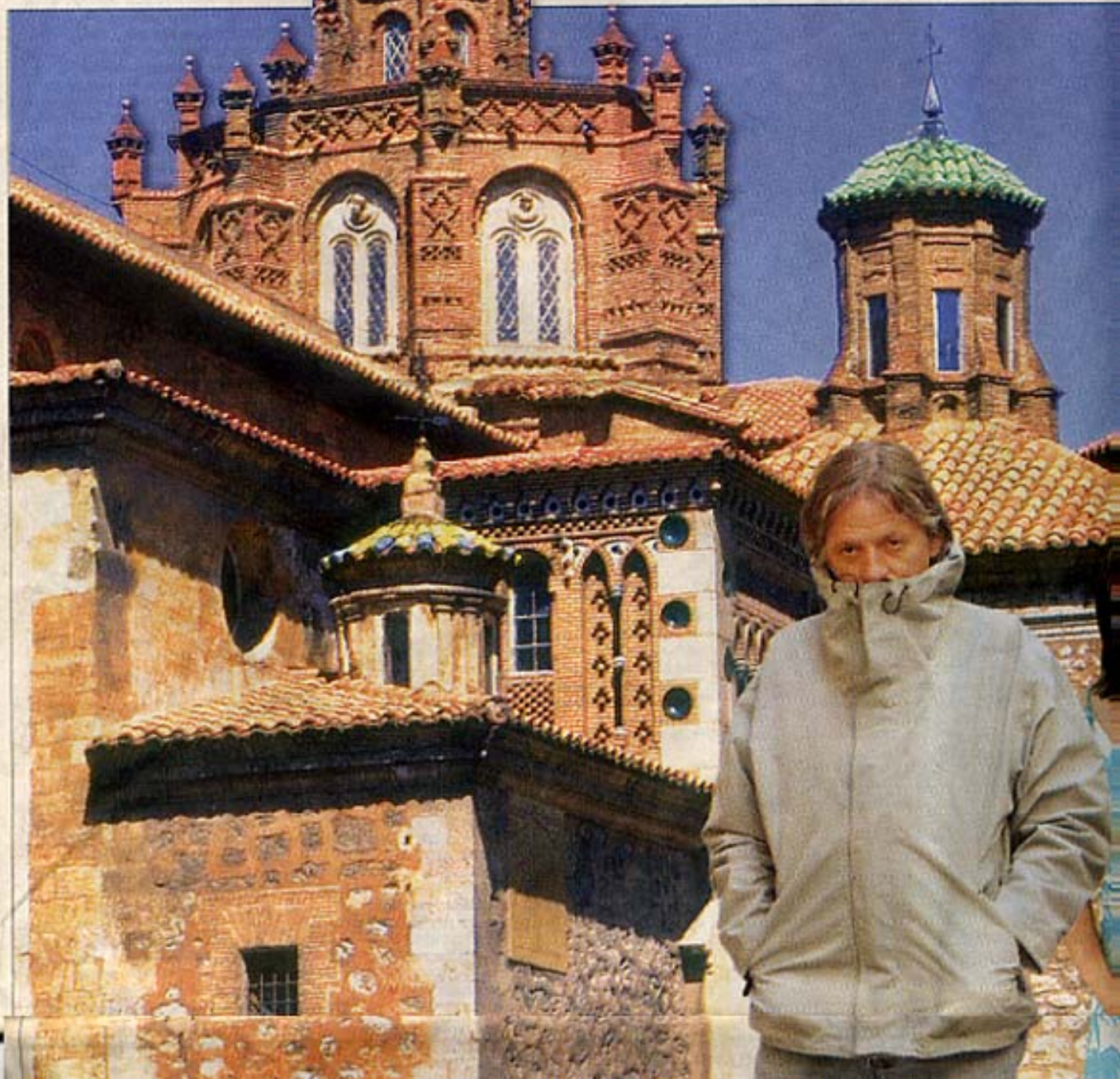


TELEGRAPH

property International

INSIDE: DON'T YOU MIND THE MYTHS, FACE THE FACTS

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The Daily Telegraph

IS, FACE THE FACTS - THE SIREN CALL OF CRETE

She left me cold



Chilling out: (below) Steve Overbury gets cold feet on arriving in Teruel, in contrast to the sunshine of TV presenter Amanda Lamb's smile

Channel 4's *A Place in the Sun* enticed Steve Overbury to Spain. But its hot tip gave him the shivers

"**S**corchio!" proclaims Caroline Aherne's weather girl on *The First Show*. Every day is "Scorchio!" she says in her mangled Spanish accent. However, the first word I learned on arriving in Teruel, South Aragon was *frio*. If I wanted *scorchio*, I was in the wrong place. For *frio* means cold and that is indeed what it was. I nearly hadn't packed my ski jacket (this was spring, after all) but I hadn't had the thing off in the past three days - zipped right up to the nose. I couldn't recall "*frio*" being mentioned in Channel 4's *A Place in the Sun* - the programme that had lured me here in the first place. "Come to Teruel," beckoned the show's siren presenter Amanda Lamb, dressed in a figure-hugging summer dress. Come to Teruel, find a sun-drenched lifestyle and double your money into the bargain was the message.

In the programme, broadcast in January, a handsome, young couple with plans to start some kind of New Age-y business - aromatherapy or some such - were shown viewing a range of interesting and incredibly cheap properties. There are still houses available in the £15,000 to £20,000 range in "vuesne pais rertier" in number seven in the 20 Best Places to Buy Abroad list, adding that it is the

need of considerable renovation, but huge, packed with potential and only £80,000 - about the same as a one-bedroom flat in Hull.

I was dazzled: mill house, sunshine, double your money in a year - yes, in a year - all wrapped up in a package by curvy Amanda. I leapt to the computer, burned up some broadband time and within minutes had booked a Ryanair flight, a hotel and a Ford Fiesta. The house hunt was on.

Despite my fervour, I did recall Amanda mentioning a few snags. Often the cheaper properties don't make it into estate agency windows, she'd said. Try and avoid estate agents anyway since they charge a horrendous commission which is nearly always paid by the purchaser. The way to find your little paradise, she suggested, was to ask in bars (the camera dutifully alighted on one) and go and talk with the local mayor. Oh, and be warned that not many people speak English.

How bad could it be, I thought? I've got by in bars from Paris to Patagonia without much trouble. I'll buy a phrasebook and a map. I can speak a bit of French - Spanish, French, it's all Latin, isn't it? I'd be OK. I wasn't daft enough to think I would have a deal signed and sealed in the four days I was there. No, I would line up three or four likely candidates and then return to Teruel with my wife for a proper recon in a few weeks' time.

Landing in Valencia had filled me with optimism. The early April sun was warm and I found the road to Teruel easily. I noticed that the car and I were climbing a bit but I didn't think much of it, even when my ears popped and I was forced to turn off the air conditioning and put on my fleece. It was only when I walked from the car to the hotel, and was raked by a wind that must have only seconds earlier been at the summit of the Pyrenees, that I began to tremble.

"*Frio*," said the receptionist matter-of-factly when she saw my "I've just got back from a Scotland to a nearby bar for dinner. Huddled figures passed me in body

InternationalProperty

Continued from page 9

hadn't I brought the gloves as well?

However, it was in the bar where the real problems began. I attempted words from the phrasebook, then used English, French, sign language and drew pictures – and only to order chicken and chips and a glass of wine. The barman and I stared blankly at each other. How would I ever get into the kind of protracted chit-chat necessary to find a local who might know where there was an unadvertised, bargain dream house sitting plum-like for a shrewd Brit like me to parachute in and pluck it?

A trip round the estate agencies the following morning, wearing most of the clothes from my bag, confirmed the worst. There was little under €120,000 (£82,000) in the windows. The two cheap ones I did see needed to be knocked down and rebuilt. Then it dawned on me: how could I hope to employ and supervise a firm of Spanish builders? No one in Teruel spoke English; not hotel receptionist or barman, none of the estate agents, nor the policemen, the bank staff or telephone operators. What's the Spanish for soffits or sink plug? I needed a full-time translator. Even David Beckham would have been useful.

A Place in the Sun had touted the fact that, in this area, there is an exodus of Spanish people from the villages to the towns. So where were the abandoned *fincas* and village houses? I hadn't seen one "For Sale" sign in my travels.

The idea of asking around in bars for a cheap house seemed increasingly preposterous. The shrewd, old farmers in the bars I visited didn't look like they'd part with that sort of information. Can you imagine a Spanish couple walking into a pub in Macclesfield and asking where all the cheap houses were? If the farmers knew that their district was listed on the *A Place in the Sun* website as a housing hot-spot, they would definitely lump on a 20-30 per cent finder's fee, or renovate the place themselves and double their money. Wouldn't you?

After two exhausting days driving around and dog-caring all the pages in my phrasebook, I retired to a restaurant for some dinner, intent on not speaking to anyone in Franglais, Spanglish, Catalan or anything else. But then I met an Englishman who politely asked if I was on holiday. I reluctantly allowed the sorry tale to be drawn out of me, watching the mirth rise in his face.

He was a journalist who lived in



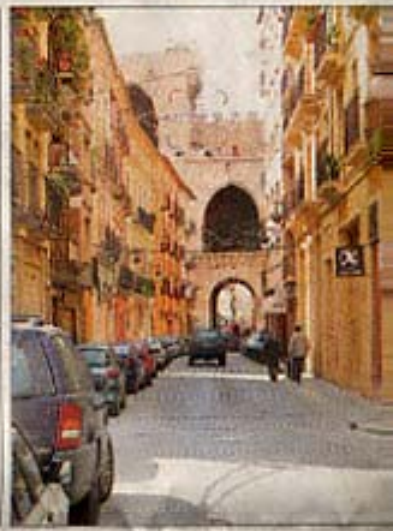
Valencia. He had been sent up here to find out if the story of bargain-basement houses in Teruel was truth or fiction. Hadn't it crossed my mind, he asked, that if there were cheap houses in the vicinity, the smart money from Valencia or Barcelona would already be flooding in?

He dispelled some of the programme's other ideas. The presenter had claimed that the new motorway from Valencia to Teruel would significantly reduce journey times and open up the area. Well, they were certainly building a motorway but how exactly was that going to turn itself into massive profits for house owners? Who were the eager purchasers or renters who would flock to this agricultural/industrial area just because it had a good road link to Valencia?

The most likely answer to that, he ventured, was Valencians taking a break. Yes, the Spanish do rent holiday homes but only at weekends.

Might it be Brits then, hot off the budget airline? Possibly, but they certainly wouldn't be hot for long – not in Teruel, anyway. And what exactly would be the attraction for Brits? There is absolutely nothing to do in the area, except perhaps hiking. It's 120 miles from the sea. Albarracin, a medieval village that clings to a crag down the road from Teruel, is beautiful and would be a pleasant diversion for a couple of hours, but then what? There's plenty of peace and quiet to be had, of course, but just how quiet do you want it to be?

More disturbing allegations came forth from my journalist





gone home cursing *A Place in the Sun* with all its photogenic button-pushing?

I pondered on how bad things might have become if I'd actually found something. My upper price limit was €60,000. I might have spent €20,000 on renovation. Then I'd have tried to let it or waited to sell it for €160,000. And waited. And waited. I may have found people from Britain prepared to fly out for an inspection, but they'd have got out of the car, been hit by that ill, chill wind and got straight back in again.

The journalist explained that, even in Valencia, he may have his central heating on eight months of the year and, he added, fuel costs can be higher than in Britain. He agreed that it might be possible to double your money if you bought for €15,000, but not at €100,000. And where were the €15,000 houses, anyway?

I abandoned the quest, went back to Valencia and spent a sunny last day rubbernecking in the old town – avoiding all the estate agents' offices. England never looked so good when I got home; it was quite mild, in fact.

My journalist friend emailed me. He had just interviewed an Irish couple who had been to see a harassed village mayor to ask about properties and been told that he was thoroughly sick and tired of being asked where all the cheap houses were.

The programme makers insisted the mill house had been for sale. In that case, one wonders why the smart, young British couple hadn't bought it. A beautiful, six-bedroom mill for £80,000 compared with the run-of-the-mill properties I'd seen – it was the bargain of the century. Apparently the female house hunter simply changed her mind – perhaps she visited it again on a less sunny day.

They didn't deny that the fountain scene was shot in a different village to the one where the house was located. But, they said, they had never implied it was the same one. They reiterated that Teruel is one of the cheapest places in Spain in which to buy property but I would say that there are good reasons for this.

The programme hasn't disputed my assertion that there aren't any bargains in the Teruel area – not of the magnitude that they claimed anyway. And they failed to comment on the chilly winds.

Of course, I might be quite wrong about Teruel. I could live to regret not trying harder and buying a place in the cold. I might live to see property prices there rocket and kick myself, but I doubt it – for one reason at least: I shan't look.

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Looks that deceive? The weathered beauty of Teruel (above left) and Albarracin (main and top left) is nothing if not beguiling. Below, the Old Town in Valencia

sleuth. The couple in the programme hadn't bought the house. In fact, it had been bought by an estate agent who was doing it up to sell. He wasn't even sure it had been for sale in the first place. When the couple had met Amanda to discuss their dream house, the fountain they had sat on was in a different village, miles from the mill house featured – a photogenic setting but a potentially misleading one.

Of course, television producers add gloss to make their programmes look good, but I was beginning to feel misled. How many other poor fools had followed the trail to Teruel – or any of the other areas *A Place in the Sun* tips, come to that – with all the time and cost that entails? How many had found themselves, like me, asking hotel staff for extra blankets? How many had