

Brexpats: trouble in paradise



What's happening to the 785,000 Britons still living in the EU after the dust has settled on Brexit? **Eugene Costello** finds there's confusion and bewilderment for some, but for others a place in the sun still appeals

Those who swapped life under the UK's dreary grey skies for something bluer and warmer are finding that the outlook is no longer so clear. Brexit has left many of the 785,000 Britons

living in the EU angry and stressed – especially those who retired to the sun but now feel let down and overlooked in the scramble to get a deal.

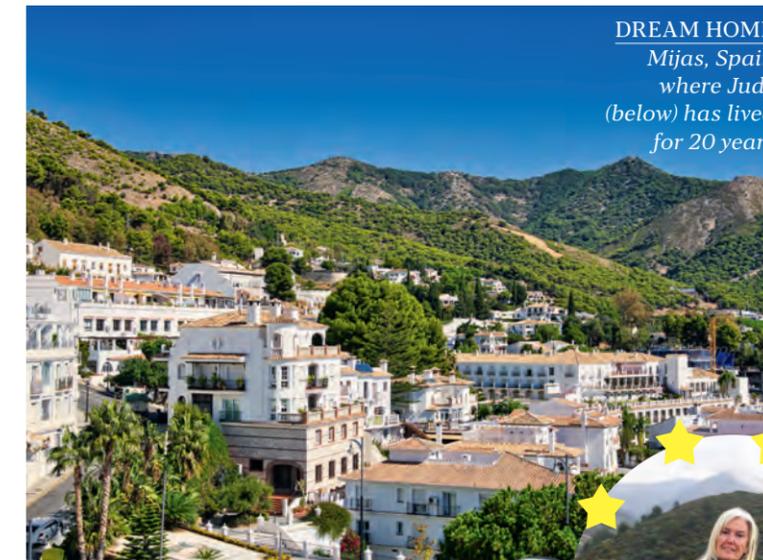
'We are the forgotten people in this whole mess,' says Judy Filmer, 69, who moved to Andalucia 20 years ago. 'People often think we're all gin-soaked pensioners sitting in a bar, and that we must all be rich because we live out here, but we are ordinary people with dreams of life in another country – and many of those dreams have been ruined.'

'Before we had rights. Now we have none and we are at the mercy of Spain. I have no political representation and I can't even vote.' Judy volunteers with Brexpats in Spain, which helps expats with the practical problems presented by post-Brexit life. It's telling that the group now has 25,000 members.

'It's broken my heart to hear stories from the people we're helping. There's a lady of 99 who has never applied for residency and is now terrified that she will be thrown out of Spain in her final years. There are people in the middle of applying for documents who can't leave the country, even to see family who are ill, in case they can't get back. Every day we are discovering new problems. Yesterday I spoke to a woman moving to Spain but all her worldly belongings are stuck in Valencia where customs officers are inspecting every item, opening every single box. She has no idea when or if she will ever see the contents of her house again. And some banks are now charging a fee to receive pensions from the UK.'

A proportion have decided to sell up since the referendum to leave the EU in 2016, although the big exodus that many predicted from Spain and France hasn't happened (possibly at least partly because it's difficult to move anywhere right now on account of Covid). Figures from the Department for Work and Pensions show that 1,824 retirees moved back home from Spain in the 12 months to May last year,

ALAMY, MIRRORPIX, GETTY, SUNPOLITICS/TWITTER



DREAM HOME
Mijas, Spain
where Judy
(below) has lived
for 20 years

'Before we had rights. Now we have none and we are at the mercy of Spain. I have no political representation and I can't even vote'

but that still leaves 103,382 pensioners in Spain, and at least 200,000 Britons of working age living there full-time.

Many believe Brexit will eventually change the character of areas dominated by British expats, such as the costas, as increased rules and paperwork mean it's harder to get by if you don't speak the language. 'We know a few people who decided to avoid the bureaucracy and head back to the UK. But they are more than replaced by those moving here to work, often remotely, who bring fresh blood to the expat community,' says Michel Euesden, from Rochdale, who moved to Fuengirola on the Costa del Sol 25 years ago and runs the *EuroWeekly* newspaper group. 'It's not a bad thing, just different. The expat communities will become more dynamic and bilingual and will gradually replace those who were here and only, or mainly, spoke English.'

The result of Britain's exit from the European Union is effectively to force people living there to make a choice: do they apply to become residents of their chosen country or do they accept limitations on their movements? If you own a home abroad but aren't a resident, ➡

COVER STORIES

Below: Brexit front pages



LIVING IN THE EU

◆ you can now only spend 90 days anywhere in the EU in every 180 days – not the six months on/six months off that was the choice of many ‘swallows’ who retired to the sun.

Many are stuck in a strange limbo at the moment: if they want to sell up they can’t because of Covid. That’s the situation for Alison Squire, 58, who lives in Murcia, south-east Spain. ‘I moved here six years ago when my boys grew up, for an adventure and to start a new life. I have loved my time here but when Brexit was looming, I decided to move back to Southampton,’ she says. ‘But I can’t sell my house – it’s a three-bed townhouse for €120,000 and has been on the market for 18 months, so I feel trapped here in lockdown. There are no Brits coming who would look at it and there are more houses on the market than there are Spanish buyers.’

Things are definitely trickier for people planning to relocate to the EU, says Valencia-based estate agent Graham Hunt. Each country sets its own requirements but if you want to move to Spain now you have to prove a net income of €2,223 per month (plus €500 a month for each additional family member), showing that you will not be a burden on the state, before applying for residency.

It’s not just Spain where problems are reported. An organisation called Brexpat – Hear Our Voice has just produced a report on life after the transition for UK nationals living in the EU. One business owner in France has had to close his firm now that freedom of movement has ended; others with non-UK partners fear they will never be allowed to move back to the UK because they won’t satisfy the minimum income requirement. Many say they feel angry and stressed by all the practical problems. For example, it’s unclear if you can bring furniture you already own from the UK to your house in France without paying customs duties or possibly French VAT. Many report having to stop buying goods on UK websites, including eBay, because they’ve been charged customs duties.

Teacher Jenan Rees, 62, who has lived in both France and the UK, spent the past three years caring for her elderly mother in the UK. But following her mother’s death she decided to return to France in



October last year. ‘I came to France with my UK-registered car, a nearly new Seat Ibiza. My plan was to take it back to England, sell it, and buy a French left-hand drive car, but I got caught out by lockdown. Now I’m in France and theoretically I have to import it from outside of the EU and could have to pay €3,000 or €4,000 in duty.

‘It’s a crazy situation. The car is sitting on my drive in Brittany and I am scared to

‘There are no Brits coming who would look at it and there are more houses on the market than there are Spanish buyers’

use it because I don’t know if I will be driving illegally or not. So it is a perfect storm of Covid and Brexit. The whole thing has been dreadfully mismanaged by the UK government. They should have arranged a transition period to avoid this kind of fiasco.’

Many feel the Government is getting away with it because Brexit and its effects are no longer top of the news agenda owing to the Covid pandemic. However, the vast majority of people are determined to stay in their adopted countries, says Judy Filmer. ‘They love the life. I certainly won’t be moving back to the UK – I wouldn’t recognise it any more.’

‘I compare Brexit to giving birth,’ adds Michel Euesden. ‘A long period of expectation, followed by the pain of labour. But now we have the chance to see what comes – and we will love whatever it turns out to be.’

AU REVOIR
Life in France is trickier for many expats



TRAPPED
Alison Squire in Murcia. Below: queues for the ferry in Brittany



ALAMY