

A D V E R T



# The man who helped build Mojácar

**Richard Torné** meets the American who played a key role in creating Almeria's biggest property hot spot

**P**ioneer developer, ardent Hispanophile, writer and explorer, Ric Polansky's life has been as colourful as that of a character from a Jack London novel.

In the resort of Mojácar, in the region of Almeria in southeast of Spain, he is best known for being a trailblazing developer who, along with his brother Paul, built the first houses along the Mojácar coastline in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the nearby hill-top village was a backwater and the beach boasted little more than a few buildings, abandoned farmhouses and a dirt track.

Donning a distinctive red boina (beret) of the famous Pamplona bull run, he greets me with a warm smile. At 73, he is much less active than he used to be. "Sometimes I've been locked up in my house for weeks - it's penance I'm paying now for an earlier life!" he jokes.

With a gravelly drawl reminiscent of Orson Welles and a hulking frame to match, he could also be a dead ringer for fellow compatriot, Ernest Hemingway. The comparison is not entirely fortuitous. "When you grew up in Iowa, the most exciting thing in the whole world was reading stories about Hemingway."

His love affair with Spain, at least in the beginning, was driven more by necessity than a desire to emulate the famous author. Caught up in the maelstrom of the Vietnam War, he tried to escape the draft as a young man, but literally dodged the bullet only after he failed the physical.

When Paul, who was setting up a construction business in Mojácar, encouraged him to come over he did not need asking twice, and together with his wife Karen he sold up and emigrated in 1969, becoming one of the few



**Top:** Hilltop town of Mojácar  
**Top right:** Mojácar Playa  
**Inset:** Ric today, enjoying his retirement house at the Mojácar's beach



Americans who settled in this part of the world at the time.

Ric joined Paul's business and before long began selling land. "About \$1,000 would buy you about 800 square metres." Soon after he set up his own construction firm, but his big break came when package holidays started taking off from Birmingham, thanks to firm Horizon Holidays. "It perked up the joint," he nods.

Mojácar's rise was also due to visionary mayor Jacinto Alarcón, who was instrumental in preventing the shrinking village from being assimilated by the nearby municipality of Turre and badgered Franco's government into building the Parador luxury hotel in 1965.

"He was a wonderful man who took nothing for himself," says Ric, although he openly admits Alarcón was not averse

to changing planning proposals if it would help to put Mojácar on the map.

Constrained by the geography, the old hill-top village or pueblo remained largely untouched, but the barren coastline was a different proposition. "Thirty apartments became 3,000 and it went on from there."

Ric soon realised that the best business deals were struck on the street, mixing with the locals in bars, and he rapidly earned a reputation for being a hard but fair employer. "If you were the one laying the electricity cables and it went wrong I would go to you to fix it that day," he stresses. "Otherwise you would never work for me again."

He sussed out when suppliers were trying to pull a fast one and, crucially, recognised the importance of adopting a hands-on approach. "If there was a truck load of marble, the fifth pallet was

unpolished. There was always something like that, like (poor quality) light switches or cement.

"The architects were also a problem because they'd put in sewage pipes no bigger than this (he makes a circle with his thumb and forefinger). You had to be on site, get up at six or seven, have a big tea and plan your day."

Diplomacy was often the best approach with a recalcitrant workforce. "I'd go to the building site in the evening with a crate of beer just as they were about to leave. They were very much like children - if you got mad at them, you wouldn't see them for years!"

His tact was also due in part to the fact many labourers had a habit of carrying knives, he reveals. "In the early days, if you walked by and turned your back on them they wouldn't think twice about waving it in your face."

On the one occasion he got involved in a bar brawl, he kept a cool head. "I stayed and bought him a drink and we talked. It's just the way they were."

If it all sounds a bit like the Wild West,

1969

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His big break came when package holidays started taking off from Birmingham, thanks to firm Horizon Holidays.

2019



**Above & right:** Mojácar's coastline in the late 1960s, when there were barely any buildings and tourists were far and few between

Ric & Paul toasting to successful business!

**Main right:** Mojácar's coastline in the 21st century



knots, but business here has always been a rollercoaster of either famine or feast."

He eventually found enough time in between his hectic schedule to build his own 'pad' in the mid 1980s - a stunning seafront villa called Casa La Mena - where he and Karen still live.

Designed by British architect Geoffrey Challan the €1.2m property is perched on a narrow hill overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, offering spectacular and unrestricted views of the ocean, thanks to panoramic windows set in a Hollywoodesque, split-level lounge.

"Challan had lots of innovative ideas," he recalls. One was knowing the importance of positioning a building

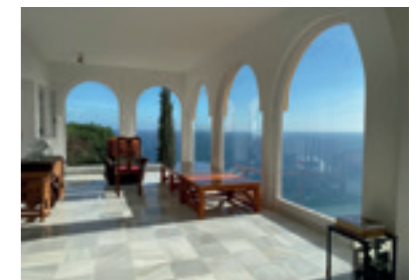
according to the sun's orientation. Consequently, the five-bedroom house is never too hot or cold, despite not having either central heating or air conditioning.

A sumptuous pool sheltered from the sea - another Challan touch - is the first feature that greets visitors. Inevitably, the glamorous property became the centre of



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Director David Lean (of Lawrence of Arabia fame) was going to rent it from me because he was going to make a film.



**Right from top:** An aerial view of Ric and Karen Polansky's house (first from the left)

The pool would not look out of place in a film or music video, so it's no surprise it was used for a Queen video (courtesy Mola Mola)

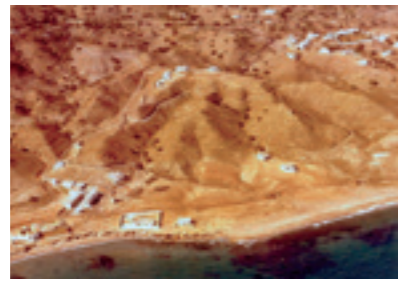
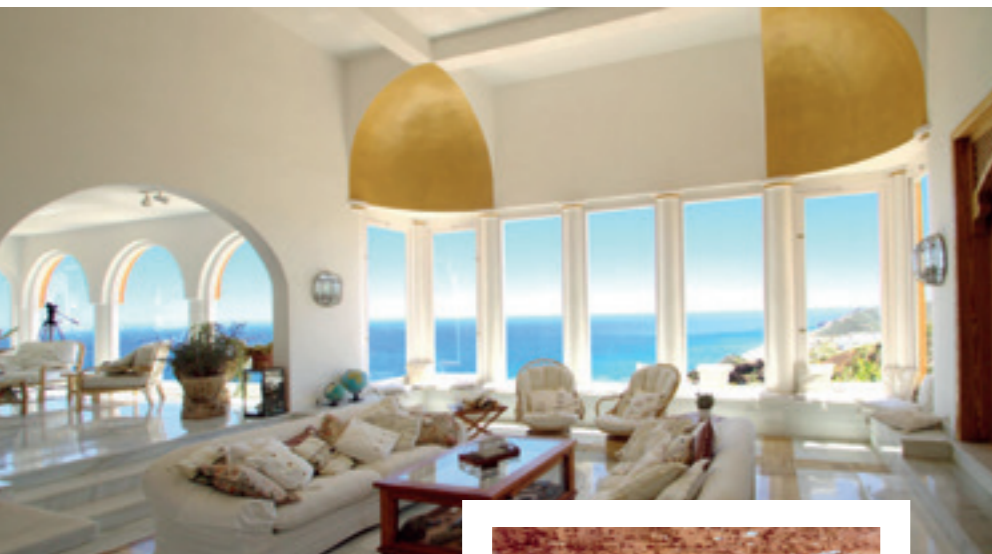
The dining room faces the pool

The jaw-dropping observatory is a bright and spacious two-level lounge

The spectacular view from the roof facing north, with the pool below and Mojácar in the background







**Top:** The jaw-dropping observatory is a bright and spacious two-level lounge

**Inset:** Mojácar's coastline in the late 1960s, when there were barely any buildings and tourists were far and few between

attention for the glitterati. "Director David Lean (of Lawrence of Arabia fame) was going to rent it from me because he was going to make a film." Lean managed to shoot a few rushes and select locations in Almería, but he died before the film could get underway. Years later, the house and pool were used to shoot a video for the British band Queen - and a lingerie catalogue. "I was in the States at the time, so I missed it, but my son [now xx] and his friends made sure they didn't!"

Now it is easy to see why tourists find Mojácar such an attractive proposition. The relatively unspoilt coastal town Ric helped to build together with the older and more picturesque hill-top village is within easy access of two airports (in Almería to the south and Murcia in the north), and boasts a variety of excellent restaurants and bars.

Mojácar's success is reflected in the size of the population, which has swollen from 1,800 inhabitants in 1970 to more than 6,300 in 2018, according to the latest figures. Of those, about 3,000 are foreigners, with British expats making up more than half that number.

But 40-odd years ago, Mojácar's bohemian appeal attracted mostly bon vivants and artists, including actor Dennis

Hopper, Colombian concert pianist Enrique Arias and the Queen's former private secretary Sir Michael Adeane. "He was an easy guy to spot because he was always running around in a suit and tie when it was 115 degrees out," Ric laughs.

"Everyone was trying to outdo themselves," he adds with a wink, hinting that in the care-free atmosphere of the late '70s everything was game and that racy parties were a regular feature in the social calendar.

Mulling over the future of Mojácar, more than half a century since he first arrived, he is adamant there are "still many cowboy builders around" but that building today "has improved a lot".

Property buyers now have also far greater choice today compared to four decades ago, but he is critical of the new British settlers who shun learning the language. "They will never get to know the people who are serving them," he says wistfully.

A picture emerges of a man at his happiest when immersed in local traditions, such as the ritual pig slaughter, known as the 'matanza'. "In the old days they'd give you a knife and ask you to take a slice of the pig you wanted, put it over a fire and eat it. That's what Spain was all about."

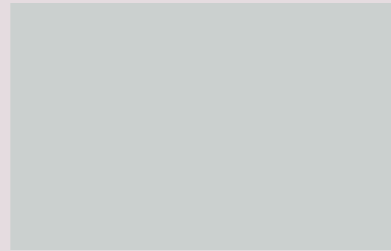
No doubt, it is a philosophy that would have appealed fully to the adventurous spirit of both Hemingway and Welles. ☺



**Arroyo Albánchez Valley, Almería**  
€140,000 (€000,000)

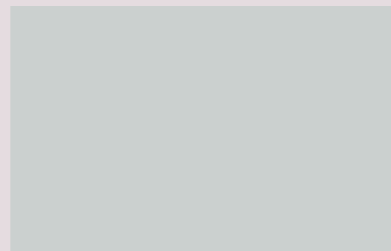
Beautifully three bedroom country house with private swimming pool, set in an enclosed plot of 2000m<sup>2</sup> in the picturesque valley of Arroyo Albánchez. Renovated to a very high standard, this character property maintains original features including exposed wooden beams. [almeriapropertyfinder.com](http://almeriapropertyfinder.com)

4 MARVELLOUS HOMES IN MOJACAR



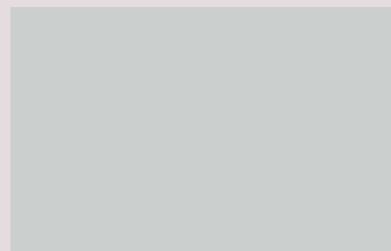
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