

# Holiday Review

Mark Sundeen

Entire House

## Beautiful Village Life in Andalusia

Jimena de la Frontera, Spain

3 guests · 1 bedroom · 1 bed · 1 bath

Mark, June 2018

We stayed one night at Karl's place in Jimena de la Frontera in southern Spain. Let me begin with the PROs. As advertised the house was beautifully situated in a whitewashed medieval village and from the sunny roof terrace we could see miles to the Rock of Gibraltar and the Mediterranean. The cobblestone lanes were so steep I had to goose the Fiat. The pleather lazyboy didn't exactly capture the gypsy soul of Andalusia, but that's fine because the sheets and towels smelled of fresh detergent.



The main PRO was price. At \$53 USD a night it was the cheapest in town. We planned this trip on short notice and could barely afford three weeks in Spain. Our summer had freed up unexpectedly and we needed to leave home. Hospital bills piled up. As I told Karl in my first email, my wife had spent four months in Jimena de la Frontera as a teenager and wanted to return. He didn't reply but that's OK we're all busy and besides, instructions for letting ourselves in were clear and I wasn't seeking a friendship during our four nights especially since Karl lives in South Africa. Point is I knew this wasn't going to be a palace.

#### CONs

It was already 8 P.M. when we arrived and C took me walking up to the old castle ruins on the hill where she used to hang out as a kid, purple sun lingering, so it wasn't until late that I saw the place was a bit dirty. I'm not a fussy person. I'm not even very clean. I've spent hundreds of nights just throwing a sleeping bag down in the dirt, and C and I lived in the back of a car for two months in Mexico. But the shower was stained with mildew and paint flaked off. Same thing behind the toilet, a black array of mold. It wasn't a matter of not having been scrubbed, rather a general sense of disrepair. The shower curtain was torn, patched with masking tape. The old, white plaster walls were smudged with fingerprints and dotted with nail holes. I suppose we could have bailed right away, but by the time we got a whiff of the musty mattress it was midnight.

Still I felt like a jerk canceling the remaining three nights. Since Karl's place lacks Wi-Fi I had to compose my complaint the next day from the terrace of the hotel down the block, all shaded by palms and lime trees, succulents blooming in clay pots. I've never canceled an Airbnb. You can read my other reviews; I'm no complainer. Look at Maria's place in Madrid—five stars across the board. Maria was waiting there when we arrived bedraggled from the airport after the overnight flight from California and she gifted us a bottle of Spanish wine and a tortilla. You can see that my review was 100% positive even though I didn't sleep well, but that's because I was awakened in the night by C's sobbing, obviously not Maria's fault.

Karl's response was swift and polite. He offered a partial refund, saying the system was forcing him to charge a cancellation fee of fifty-five dollars. Fine. He added:

some times an occasional guest creates the perception of problems that stems from another reason that later emerges because after all it's not a hotel and people often project that need for that type of environment.

I was irked that Karl implied that the mildew was not a problem but merely my perception of a problem, and that the peeling paint was just my projection of inner turmoil, and that I didn't know what a hotel was, but really I just wanted my money back. By now we'd had coffee

and toast at the hotel. C used to drink beer on this very terrace and was pleased to see it unchanged.

Karl wrote to say he had a second house we could move into. We trudged up the steep lane upon which C's knees ached and we met Karl's housekeeper who showed us around. It was a step-up, clearly where Karl himself stayed. His surfboard hung in the entry, his videocassette collection lined the wall. But as we walked back down the hill, C and I felt a coldness. "Moving into Karl's other house is just moving closer to Karl," she said. "Here's where Karl sleeps. Here's where Karl brushes his teeth." Even the kind woman who showed us around: "Here's the person who cleans up after Karl." We moved to the hotel where I clicked to cancel, sure that Airbnb would remove the fee.

By then we were hungry so we traversed the cobblestone to Bar España where we sat on the terrace with a wide view of the cork forests and cattle range of Andalusia and I drank a beer with a ration of prawns in butter and garlic while C had mineral water and a mixed salad with tuna and egg. Save for the old men watching soccer, we had the place to ourselves.

"How long was his spirit in the world?" C said.

"Where is it now?" I said.

"I want him so bad."

Any relief we felt being extricated from Karl's gloomy little homes was premature. Upon returning to our new room with its sparkling bathtub we splashed into the pool on the roof, where C found an avocado fallen from a tree and I discovered Karl's latest note.

Hi Mark it appears that C is looking for something other than the style of place you booked and as such a normal cancelation should apply because 2 places can't be that wrong. As I said before, normally the real reason comes out later. It appears that C desires a more refined hotel like establishment.

Typically I wouldn't use this venue to emote but Karl's note hurt my feelings. It was chauvinistic to assume it was my wife, and not me, who could not appreciate the grime on the lid of the trash can. Actually it was me who objected to the single nonstick fry pan dangling above the stove, Teflon flaking in ribbons; me who was saddened by the table made of particleboard and held together with Scotch tape.

But what really wounded me was the way Karl casually referred to C by first name as if he knew her. He had no right.

Karl, may I address you directly? We had other plans for this summer. I had planted and watered a patch of grass under the mulberry tree where we would hang a swing. We bought the stroller and the crib and the Bjorn thing. Instead, we came to Jimena. When my wife came here as a girl, it was not on some lark, but because her house burned down and her parents were caught without insurance or savings, and a family friend offered to take her to Spain as a nanny for their son. Same thing



now: This was not our first choice.

After your note refused our refund we took a long walk along the lazy river, the Rio Hozgarganta, with its stone aqueduct and Roman mills with shady pools. Thousands of pink oleanders blossomed along its banks and we peeled off our clothes and plunged into the green water. My wife told me a story about walking this river alone when she was fifteen. A shepherd had approached and invited her to see a cave. This sounded like a bad idea, but she'd never met a shepherd before, didn't even know they still existed, and, most importantly, hell yes she wanted to see a cave. Once they arrived he asked for a little kiss, and she bolted past him and sprinted to freedom. Most of the traits I love about her are depicted here. First, she has the courage and wanderlust to be roaming the woods

by herself. Next, she gives people the benefit of the doubt. She also has the sense when things go bad to run like hell. But what I love most of all is her curiosity, her insistence on

**Any relief we felt being extricated from  
Karl's gloomy little homes was premature.**

knowing all the world, especially its oddities like shepherds and caves.

We swam and swam, floating in flowers. Karl, we named our son Silver and swaddled his flawless body in a hand-knit shawl and when I pushed C's wheelchair out of the hospital elevator, she said, "Put the sunglasses on my face," and the people smiled at us like the bundle in her lap was filled with joy. As for the car seat, I left it with the nurses because I couldn't bear to bring it home empty. A Mormon friend sent me a note. "You and your wife will raise your son in the spirit world. I testify this to be true." We drifted in those oleanders. Where was our son? Where was that spirit world?

Karl, you're right that a real reason comes out later. For me it was the tear in the bedsheet. My wife pointed it out to me in the morning. I guess that's the other reason we are in Spain, to make another baby, to start again our family. We held each other with soaring tenderness and neither of us cried.

I thought my suffering was boundless, but that morning it reached its bottom limit. I was not willing to launch our new life from your stale mattress with its torn sheet. I was not going to nourish my wife with a meal fried in your cracked skillet. And your other home—even though it was nicer—it too reeked of a sort of aging-man-loneliness and I suspected that in the closets and cabinets I'd discover small grenades of despair.

I wanted to forget you, Karl, but as the days passed you dwelled in my chest with a deep ache. Someone in Jimena told me that you have two grown daughters who live here, that they used to look after the house, but there was a falling out, and since then the place has sunk

into disrepair. I was not surprised. I felt estranged from you after just two days.

Karl, my bones are pierced! I am afraid of all my sorrows. My patch of grass sprouted up green and tender just in time to place folding chairs upon it. My brother drove across Albuquerque to Home Depot and bought wooden boards and a six-pack and built a tiny crate. We had to put him in there, Karl. C's parents drove our son up to Montana and in a grove of birch behind their house I dug a hole with my brother and dad and nephew and niece through the duff and the rocks and clay to where the spring water seeped. His little fingernails kept growing and I wanted to clip them but couldn't bring myself to do it. I laid my son in a box lined with cedar boughs and we sprinkled his body with water from the sea and water from the river.

Karl, my soul is weary of my life. Why did you take my son, my only child? And why not me instead? I will never be able to call my son on a Saturday afternoon and ask him to run down to the rental and scrub the mildew in the shower.

But I will call to him anyway. When I'm old I will call out to my son: When you're done painting will you replace the fry pan. Spare no expense—get a heavy one cast in iron with a handcrafted oak spatula. Maybe our guests will be lovers and he'll cook breakfast and carry it to the terrace where they will kiss and nap in the warm sun. And, Son, buy a new set of sheets, take my credit card, the softest cotton the color of cream. Gather buckets of the pink oleanders that line the Rio Hozgarganta that flows through Jimena de la Frontera, arrange them about the bed. Make it nice. Son, those lovers might just be your mother and father conjuring you by miracle back into this world. We may never know a stranger's sorrow until we know our own. Their hearts are fragile, so be kind. Make the bed, boy! Make it lovely. ■