

Horror stories

31st October. I'm at home awaiting the ringing of the doorbell for the trick or treaters, so to be topical I guess that I could write about the Ford Phantom, or the Seat Spectre, but I thought that instead I could relive some of the horror stories that we have come across and that I was unexpectedly reminded of last week

7.30 pm; we are meeting a customer at a roundabout near to Murcia airport to hand over his papers and plates following re-registration. It is pitch black. Next to the roundabout was a garden centre. We decided to see if there was a coffee bar inside over which we could discuss the business in hand; it was about to close and the two young women seemed surprised that I was asking about a coffee bar when the premises were clearly not a café. No they didn't have one.

Back to the car for the hand over and the customer left a happy man. I was about to drive off when there was a tap at the window; a man stood there flashing an identification badge and asked me to get out. I stood in front of him and could smell alcohol on his breath, though he wasn't drunk. I asked him to show me his ID again and was surprised that he was a Guardia Civil in plain clothes. He asked what we were doing and I told him of our business

There followed an interrogation about the purpose of us approaching the garden centre. He asked to see my documents, which I keep in the car boot. Upon opening the boot, his eyes lit up when he saw an array of number plates and papers. I reminded him what our business was, but he made a phone call and read off the registration numbers whilst clearly showing concern. A few minutes passed and he shook our hands said "sorry to have detained you, have a good evening, but next time you need a coffee, go to a bar". Clearly the ladies at the garden centre after being approached in the dark by three foreigners asking strange questions had called the cops and any officer would look upon a boot full of number plates as suspicious

Last week, I was reminded about this incident, when we received a call from a customer whose car had been impounded by the Guardia Civil. The customer had just dropped some friends off at Murcia airport when he was pulled over. I guess that checks on non-registered taxis were being conducted; nevertheless the Guardia decided that he should have had his UK plated car re-registered and took him to the nearby Cuartel (barracks). There he was denounced, his car taken impounded and caught a taxi home

He hired a car and an interpreter and for the next few days he was sent from one office to another, collecting bits of paper. In the process he had to find 2400 euros for "import tax", which was totally unexpected expenditure

The next step was to recover the car and as by this time he had called me, I agreed to meet him. The manager at the pound was friendly, but needed another bit of paper in order to release the car. He called the Guardia Civil, got passed round a bit, uttered "mierda" a few times and told us to expect some officers. Shortly afterwards, who should turn up, but the same officer that had asked about my desire for coffee in strange places a couple of years earlier, though this time in uniform. Paperwork was eventually produced, our customer paid more money for the privilege of having his

car towed away and stored and we were all released to go immediately to the ITV centre to start the re-registration process

Fortunately the customer could lay his hands on the over 3000 euros that this experience has caused him, but had become quite distressed over the whole affair and was joyous once we got going. Made me feel good too

This is not a unique experience for us, but whilst we get our fair share of challenges, nearly all are overcome. Many are caused by not having the right bits of paper or not understanding the system

Here are some regularly occurring horror stories

An expat has had enough of life in the sun and decides to return to colder climes where the grass may be somewhat greener. His UK plated car is sold to a neighbour. The new owner lives in a neighbourhood where there is no shortage of foreign plated cars and decides to leave it as it is. Eventually after much encouragement from his wife (he calls it nagging) he decides to make the car Spanish, so calls us up. The car is not in his name, but apart from a receipt has no other details of the registered keeper who sold it to him. No he is not in touch with his former neighbour

Now rewind to my experience with the Guardia. What would have been his reaction if the car was not registered in my name and there was no MOT/ ITV test certificate?

OK, some people are a bit wiser than this, so when they buy a UK car from a neighbour will try to have it transferred to their name via DVLA using their brother's address. Whoops, the car has been declared exported by the registered keeper so that he doesn't have to pay UK road tax, so DVLA will not issue a new log book

If the car has not been declared exported, then the new owner may be able to obtain a logbook. He tries to re-register it, but oh dear, the car was a grey import from Japan and does not have type approval, so the Spanish are not interested. Grey imports are imported into the UK as unique vehicles (SVA) but this does not make them acceptable in any other EU country, except in certain circumstances

Are your headlights suitable for Spanish roads? Are the tyres the same on the same axle? How many rear fog lights? These are standard questions that we ask. Occasionally we are told that a garage has adjusted the lights, the tyres are new and the fog light is OK. Maybe not; the lights have been made to point down, but not to the left (very few cars have lights that can be switched for continental driving). The tyres have the wrong speed rating; this doesn't seem to matter in the UK, but it certainly does in Spain. Yes the car has a rear fog light, but it's not on the left of the car

Spain is not the UK (thank God say most of us). Cars must be roadworthy enough to pass an ITV with the correct lights and tyres and the authorities certainly want to know if you really do own the car

As virtually all situations can be legally dealt with, avoid your own horror story by seeking expert advice beforehand. We work in a highly specialised and complex area

of Spanish law. Why would you expect the bloke down the bar to have all the answers?