

To Lure Tourists, a Remote Village in Spain Turns Its Eye to the Arts

By **RAPHAEL MINDER** SEPT. 3, 2014



Sculptures in Genalguacil, Spain. Organizers hope a biennial art festival will turn Genalguacil into a “museum village.”

Credit Laura Leon for The New York Times

GENALGUACIL, Spain — This Spanish village has a new cemetery, though no one has ever been buried in it. Built before the onset of the financial crisis, and against the wishes of residents who wanted their final resting place to be in the old village cemetery, it was yet another Spanish investment plan that failed.

Yet the cemetery came to life, so to speak, last month when two Spanish artists plastered some of its walls and niches with spoof posters advertising the unlikely opening of a Guggenheim Museum in Genalguacil, population 522.

The posters' designers — Juan Francisco Casas and Eugenio Merino Troncoso — were among 13 artists who took part in a two-week festival that, its organizers hope, will turn Genalguacil (pronounced hai-nahl-gwah-THEEL) into “a museum village” by ensuring that whatever works were produced here would remain on permanent display.

Many art festivals offer residency, subsidizing a place to stay for artists while they pursue their work. But the festival in Genalguacil was an unusual attempt to support Spanish artists while also bringing some measure of economic revival to a remote, ancient village, accessible only by a winding road that turns into a dirt track a few miles away.

Genalguacil is among the so-called pueblos blancos, a series of whitewashed villages where many hang on cliffs, near the southern coast of Spain. Its church was built on the ruins of a mosque, and its streets still follow the layout originally designed by the Moors who conquered southern Spain.

But those charms alone have not been enough to draw the level of tourism and commerce needed to keep all-such villages vibrant in a hilly region that remains far less visited than Marbella and the more accessible seaside resorts along the Costa del Sol.

The eurozone's economic downturn made matters worse, and it has left many Spanish regions like this one relying on their wits and imagination to change their fortunes.

The biennial arts festival here was in some ways initially a victim of overreaching ambitions. In 2004, before the country's housing bubble burst, the same mayor who added the unwanted cemetery built a three-story museum to house some of the art produced during the festival.

Genalguacil, on the Costa del Sol, has a population of 522.

“Ten years ago, everybody in Spain wanted to have a museum without even thinking about what to put inside,” said Fernando Bayona, who recently took over as the arts coordinator of the festival. “Today, I don't think anybody would be building a museum of this size here.”

The current mayor, Miguel Ángel Herrera, said the bet on contemporary arts to draw tourists was already paying off. During the two weeks of the festival, about 8,000 people visited Genalguacil, out of a total of 20,000 visitors expected this year, according to estimates from the town hall.

The mayor's artistic push also now involves attracting moviemakers to his spruced-up village. This month, Juanma Bajo Ulloa, a Spanish director, will film part of his new comedy, "Rey Gitano," or "Gypsy King," in Genalguacil.

Mr. Herrera predicted that the town hall would close the year with a budget surplus — also thanks to greater spending discipline and steering clear of projects like adding an unused cemetery.

"This investment was a disaster, I can't think of any other word for it," Mr. Herrera said. "It doesn't make it any better, but this kind of thing really happened in most other municipalities around here."

Instead, the town invested in art, to its benefit and to that of the artists. This year, the festival had a budget of about 110,000 euros, or \$144,400. Each of the selected artists received \$1,300, as well as free food and accommodation during the two weeks.

Even if that amounts to a modest wage, the festival still managed to attract some of Spain's leading contemporary artists.

Mr. Merino, the co-designer of the Guggenheim poster project, created something of a sensation two years ago at ARCO, a major Madrid arts fair, where he displayed "Always Franco," a statue of the former Spanish dictator in a Coca-Cola fridge.

In June, Mr. Merino had a show at the Unix gallery in New York, in which he expanded on his "political freeze" theme by placing busts of politicians like Fidel Castro and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia inside fridges.



Every two years, Spanish artists gather at the festival to work. The city gives them a modest wage and free room and board.

Credit Laura Leon for The New York Times

The Guggenheim poster, he explained, was intended as a backhanded swipe at the ambition of many Spanish cities to replicate the success of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao by importing foreign art rather than investing in Spanish artists.

The latest major arts project to land in Spain is a planned Pompidou museum in Málaga that will be the first overseas offshoot of the Paris arts center. The museum is scheduled to open in 2015, in a cubelike structure along the port of Málaga, which has also become a major destination for cruise ships.

“It really makes no sense that Spain has been cutting back its support to domestic artists but somehow feels it needs to import more from overseas,” Mr. Merino said.

Spending two weeks in an isolated village alongside other artists, Mr. Merino argued, is an experience that can be more enriching than having work on display at ARCO or in a New York gallery.

In fact, some of the artists said that taking part in the Genalguacil festival was a chance to meet not only other artists but also local residents. Nekane Manrique, a Basque painter, organized a yoga workshop at the start of the festival. Using photos taken during a yoga session, she then completed a painting of two women with their arms outstretched.

Maria Bueno, another painter, asked residents for their favorite cooking recipe, as well as permission to then turn the recipe into a mural painting on the wall of their house or restaurant.

“I think that is much more rewarding than having my work inside a museum, as if it was put inside a box,” Ms. Bueno said. “I really believe this festival should allow the village to breathe art in a way people here haven’t done before.”

Like many other Spanish villages, however, Genalguacil has an aging farming population whose main preoccupation has not been admiring art.

Francisco Izquierdo, a retired farmer, said that he did not have strong feelings about the murals and outdoor statues that now adorn his village, but that he appreciated the greater focus on aesthetics and the fact that “all this art has helped make this place a lot cleaner.”

Still, even if arts and tourism added revenues and created some jobs, he said more needed to be done to guarantee the village’s long-term future. “There is no longer enough farming,” he said, “so the young continue to leave and the old stay.”

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