

In The Garlic

Your Informative, Fun Guide to Spain

by

Valerie Collins & Theresa O'Shea

Arroba This is how you say the @ (“at”) in email addresses in Spanish and Portuguese. *Arroba* refers both to the sign and to an old Spanish unit of weight equivalent to around 25 English pounds. Far more interesting is the current use of the sign in the battle against sexist language, where it is used to substitute the masculine “o” in nouns which refer to groups of mixed gender. So instead of writing “*los niños*” (the children), and excluding girls, and instead of writing the politically correct but long-winded “*los niños y las niñas*”, we can write *l@s niñ@s* and keep everyone happy. However, there are plenty of academics, journalists, and *ciudadan@s* (citizens) who are up in arms about all such attempts to tamper with the Spanish language. Quite how the new vowel should be pronounced is anybody's guess.

Domiciliación bancaria This tongue-twister refers to paying bills (**recibos**) by direct debit. When you sign up for utilities such as phone, water, electricity and so on, you are obliged to give an account number as a matter of course: paying any other way is not an option. Ditto private insurance, social security payments, satellite TV, Internet... It certainly makes things simpler; it also means that they can sneak extra payments through, so watch your statements like a hawk. But *domiciliación* is not just about shelling out. You will also be asked for an account number to have your salary, tax rebate, social security benefits and insurance payouts transferred directly into your account. Lucky you.

Funcionario Government employee. If a machine or a system works well, it is said to *funciona bien*. *Funcionarios*, on the other hand, famously don't, or rather do, but as little as possible. A great many people dream of being *funcionarios*. They study long and hard to become one by passing their **oposiciones** (competitive exams for government jobs). The pay is not brilliant, but the benefits are great and the hours a dream: 8 am–3 pm with written-in-stone coffee breaks, and reduced hours on Fridays and in the summer. Best of all, short of committing serial murder, it is virtually impossible to get fired or laid off. All of this makes for a comfortable and complacent workforce that is long on laid-back and short on sweetness and light. Jokes about the so-called *mentalidad de funcionario* abound. Like this one, posted on the web site of the Junta de Andalucía: “My Paco's a *funcionario* in the Junta. You should see how fast he is — he leaves work at three, and by two he's had lunch and is having his siesta.”

Hora The magic word. Life becomes so much easier when it clicks that *hora* is the correct word for appointment. If you want to make one, say: “*Quisiera pedir hora*.” However — and this is quite a big however — having an *hora*, even *primera hora*, while relieving you of fighting for a **número** and a place in the queue, doesn't necessarily mean you won't have to endure hours of waiting. *Cita*, a blanket term for appointments of all kinds, is also a date, so better not

ask your hairdresser/doctor/dentist/osteopath/psychiatrist, etc. for one unless you really fancy your chances.

Indicación Geográfica Protegida (IGP) Officially translated as Protected Designation of Origin. To be awarded an IGP with its distinctive blue-and-yellow seal (the same as the **DOP** but with the relevant wording) there has to be a link with the geographical location in at least one of the stages of production, transformation or elaboration of the product. Spanish IGP goodies include Mallorcan *ensaimadas* (so that's what's in those huge octagonal parcels you see everyone lugging off the planes and ferries from the Balearics), *turrón* from Alicante and Jijona, beans from Asturias, apples from Girona, clementines from the Ebro Valley...

ITV (Pronounced ee-tay-OO-vay). Not a defunct television channel, but Inspección Técnica de Vehículos and the Spanish equivalent of the MOT. On a new car it's four years before you are required to roll up at your local ITV depot, take a number, and wait nine hours to put your car through the hoops. You probably won't understand any of the instructions, most of which consist of utterances such as: "da-lay, da-lay, da-lay" (give it one, i.e. switch on the windscreen wipers, squirt the water spray, beep the horn etc.), tee-ra, tee-ra, tee-ra (keep going back), and "¡Para! (Stop!)". If all goes well, the car's *ficha técnica* (technical specifications card) will be stamped and you'll get a nice sticker for your windscreen. Otherwise, you have two months to get the vehicle into roadworthy condition. Driving without an up-to-date ITV will lose you four points off your licence under the new points system.

Lehendakari Utterly unlike any other word for a leader or president or first citizen, this is the title given to the president of the Basque autonomous government. It sounds rather ancient and mysterious, but in fact was coined by the 19th-century nationalist Sabino Arana who derived it from *lehen* meaning first. He coined a host of new words, but *lehendakari* is one of the few that has found a permanent place in the Basque language.

Molar A young people's slang word, often heard from dubbed-into-Spanish Bart Simpson, meaning to be cool or hot, to rock, or the latest expression of approval. "¡Este coche mola!" conveys the idea that the vehicle in question is really something, it's great, it's fantastic. "Esto no me mola" really means "I don't like this" (it sucks). Like many other Spanish slang words (most of which have also been incorporated into Catalan unchanged) *molar* is originally from **caló**, the language of Spanish gypsies.

Primera comunión First communion. A complete mystery to one who did not grow up in the Catholic faith (or any faith for that matter). At the age of eight or nine, children suddenly have to fit in *catequesis* classes with their 98,000 other extra-curricular activities. After learning the various what-Catholicism-is-all-about precepts off by heart, the child partakes of his or her first communion at a special mass (usually in May), receives hundreds of presents and has a whopping great party at a restaurant or hotel. During the last 10 years or so, first communions have spiralled out of all financial proportion, with the average family now spending over 3000 euros per child. The most expensive items are

the clothes and accessories of the commuee (girls in white meringue dress and boys in military uniform or sailor suit) and the wedding-style banquet, with typically 50-100 guests at 30-36 euros a head. You may think “I’m not Catholic, it won’t affect my child”. Wrong. No-one likes seeing their kids left out, and peer pressure is so strong at school (“But mum, everyone else gets loads of presents”) that you will probably find yourself relenting.

Recibo A receipt. What you get after you have paid a bill, right? But in Spain, you’re more than likely to get your receipt *before* you pay the bill. In fact the *recibo* is the bill. In the old days, when *recibos* came through the post or people knocked on your door with them demanding cash, once you had paid up the *recibo* would be stamped and serve as the receipt. Now the whole thing has been cleverly streamlined via the *de rigueur domiciliación bancaria* for everything from gas and electricity to yoga classes to the installments on your car. *Pagar un recibo* now means to pay a direct debit. *Un recibo* is also a receipt in all the usual senses. In shops, make sure you get one — usually called *el tiket* if it comes out of the cash register — which you will need in order to return the goods if they are faulty.

Santo Although Spain is officially a secular state, and most Spaniards would qualify as lapsed Catholics, saints and their feast days are still woven into the social fabric in a curious blend of religious, secular and even pagan ritual. Every town and village, every social group and profession has its patron saint, which can cause havoc. Like March 3, Sant Medir in Barcelona’s Gràcia neighbourhood, the day a friend of Valerie’s almost had her baby in the car. At 8am the city is shaken by 24 cannon shots (the Catalans are nothing if not punctual), and then horsemen and brass bands parade through the streets, throwing tons of boiled sweets and leaving piles of steaming horse poo. Also expect traffic jams in even the sleepest mountain villages on July 25, St Christopher’s day, patron saint of travellers, when local priests bless all vehicles (and that includes tractors) passing through.

Vuelva Vd mañana Come back tomorrow. The final lethal weapon in the armoury of all Spanish bureaucrats, closely related to the Law of Falta Uno (there’s always one thing missing - see *burocracia*)

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