

Love on a Mountaintop

The town of Campillo de Ranas used to be in the middle of nowhere. You would expect it to be. After all, it's a tiny village set high in the mountains about two hours north of Madrid. With a small church, a tiny town hall and a cluster of cottages, it doesn't seem to offer much –except a pretty view. The rugged mountain gorges go for miles and miles in each direction. They are scattered with pine trees that hide small mountain streams and, apparently, a lot of wild rabbit. This was a spot favoured only by hunters or the more adventurous tourist. It's a butch kind of place yet, somehow, Campillo de Ranas has now become the gay wedding capital of Spain.

This queer partnership is the brainchild of Mayor Francisco Maroto, who spotted the benefits that hosting gay weddings would have on the economy of his struggling town. Maroto, who is gay, moved there with his boyfriend in 1984. They were both sick of city life



in Madrid and fancied a change. That move changed their lives – and the lives of their new neighbours. It's normally difficult to be gay in rural villages and small towns but Maroto says they were largely accepted. "It is a small place", he explains. "People know your business and you know theirs. But the people around here were welcoming and friendly. In fact, if the local kids saw my partner with another man, they come running to tell me!"

The couple spent 20 years establishing a happy life for themselves in the village and by the time Spain's Socialist government introduced gay marriage to Spain in 2005, Maroto had already been elected mayor of the area. Officiating at weddings – both gay and straight – fell under his new job description, so when he heard that other mayors were refusing to marry gays, he announced that he would glad to oblige. It was a move that brought the village a lot of attention – *and a lot of business*.

At first, he faced some obstruction – most notably from the local Justice of the Peace who resigned in protest. Undeterred, Maroto offered the job to his partner and opened the village up for (gay wedding) business. In a feat of multi-tasking that would make a lesbian swoon, his partner is also the town DJ. Talk about keeping it in the family.

Gay couples flocked to the area to tie the knot and, “if it’s fashionable enough for the gays...”, straight couples soon wanted a piece of the cake too. Before long, the wedding industry had revived the economic fortunes of the area. The hospitality trade here is now thriving. Small guesthouses and restaurants that once had only seasonal trade now host weddings all year round.

And it’s not just the tiny village of Campillo de Ranas that has benefitted. The surrounding area has also been bitten by the wedding bug with new guesthouses and restaurants opening all the time. Naturally, this growth has made the area more attractive to young couples – both gay and straight. Many have built homes in the area, as permanent or summer homes. This influx of youth has fed back into the economy and even the village school, which was closed down 30 years ago, has now been reopened.

“I don’t want to turn the village in to a town or, worse still, a city!”, Maroto insists, “I just want the people here to live well. The weddings provide locals with secure employment. Plus, there is the wedding tax, which we use to pay for local amenities such as electric street lighting for the whole area. To make a political statement is a bonus.”

But a strong political statement was made. Maroto proved that gay weddings could benefit a community – even a traditionally conservative one. He demonstrated that the benefits could be economic as well as social. “People become very open-minded when they see how they can benefit”, he adds with a twinkle in his eye.

Despite his successes, Maroto says he doesn’t have any further political ambitions. “A career politician would never have moved from Madrid”, he laughs. He insists that his main motivation is to be a “good neighbour because that’s how you create good neighbours. In a small village, you can’t ask for anything more”.

He also scoffs at the notion that the area has become overrun with gay people. “Most gay weddings are family affairs and when you add work colleagues and old school friends, it’s always a straight majority,” he laughs, before adding that, “the village isn’t quite ready for a gay sauna just yet!”

To date, none of the marriages Francisco Maroto had performed has ended in divorce. Here’s hoping!

This article was originally printed in GCN. The story of Francisco Maroto was also told in a 2007 feature length documentary “Campillo Si Quiero” and was screened at the GAZE film festival in August 2009 in association with the Instituto Cervantes.