

Brits in Spain: four broad Brexit narratives (though sometimes it's best to avoid the topic)



At least 300,000 Britons live in Spain. [Joel Busher](#) has spoken to a number of those in Mallorca and the Costa Blanca about their views and feelings for a British Academy-funded project about their Brexit journeys. He identifies four main narratives, which range from optimism and confidence about life post-Brexit to dismay and anger. Many are careful about what they say on the subject, and to whom – and there is still a great deal of uncertainty about their situation after March 2019.

Not surprisingly, there is considerable variation in the way British people in Spain are experiencing Brexit. They are, after all, [a pretty diverse bunch](#) – former gangsters and retirees sipping G&Ts by the pool with occasional breaks to play bowls or visit bars draped in Union Jacks are a distinct minority.

Over the last six months I have been speaking with British people living in Mallorca and the Costa Blanca about their Brexit journeys – in-depth interviews with 39 people and countless informal conversations. I've spoken with, among others, teachers, financial advisors, lawyers, a member of the clergy, designers, a careers advisor, business people, a student, writers, maintenance workers and, yes, a smattering of retirees (themselves with tremendously varied working lives).

In some respects, the lives of these people could hardly be more different: some are married with children, some aren't; some have grandchildren, some don't; there are singletons, people with a British partner, people with a Spanish partner and people with a partner from another EU member state; some speak fluent Spanish, some don't and some speak fluent Spanish, Catalan and German; some live in relative 'expat' enclaves while others are 'the only Brit in the village'; some have been in Spain for 30 years, some a matter of months; some have a small pool of local friends and acquaintances while others run youth basketball leagues, are captains of [petanca](#) teams, volunteer in charity shops and lead neighbourhood committees.



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What they have in common is that they are all British citizens ('at least for the time-being!' in some cases) and are currently faced with the uncertainties that Brexit entails. At the risk of gross simplification, I have been hearing four broad Brexit narratives so far:

'It's not going to make any difference to me (and if anything, it is going to be good for Britain)': These narratives are most common among those who supported Brexit, more or less energetically, and are under-represented in my interview sample because it usually those who are concerned about Brexit who are most willing to take the time to talk with me (I often hear this narrative in informal conversations). These narratives are usually underpinned by a combination of confidence in their own economic and legal situation, and a belief that a reasonable Brexit deal will be struck for the simple reason that it is in everyone's best economic interests – Spain in particular is perceived to depend heavily on British investment. Memories of earlier exchange rate fluctuations and memories (personal or vicarious) of British people living in Spain prior to its accession to the EU in 1986 are also often invoked.

'I do worry about how Brexit might affect me/my family, but I understand why people voted for Brexit': Of the people who tell me variations of this narrative, some were in favour of and some against leaving the EU, but most observe that, had they been living in the UK, they might have voted Leave. Those who eventually came down on the Remain side describe doing so primarily due to concerns about their own situation. Those who came down on the Leave side usually say they did so for the futures of their children or grandchildren in the UK.

These narratives are usually imbued with nostalgia and peppered with more or less oblique references to immigration into the UK: often in the form of comments about how they no longer recognise Britain as the country they grew up in. When I point out that they could also be described as immigrants, most argue that they are different, usually making claims about the economic contribution that they make in Spain ('you know, who buys the houses here?' 'British people are spending their pensions here') and/or what they consider to be their efforts to adapt to the 'Spanish way of life' (variously understood, but often explained with references to Spanish friends and neighbours, clubs they have joined, local charities they work with/support etc).

'I (suspect I) will be alright but I don't like it and some people won't be alright': I usually hear such narratives from people who identify as Remainers, and in most cases are Remainers who have/had fairly successful careers and a pretty good (in some cases exceptionally detailed) grasp of Spanish and Spanish bureaucratic systems. They are wary of the challenges that Brexit might pose for them in terms of work permits, reduced access to free healthcare, increased bureaucratic demands on them/their businesses and so forth, but are broadly confident that they have the wherewithal to manage these. They worry however about those with lower incomes, smaller pension pots and who are less able to navigate local bureaucracies – worries sometimes mixed with incredulity at the number of British people they meet who seem unconcerned by Brexit.

They also see Brexit as contrary to values that they hold dear – such as the embrace of cosmopolitanism and free movement – and have found that Brexit has raised difficult questions for them about who they are and where they belong. Their Brexit narratives are permeated by sadness, disappointment and a feeling of loss that is sometimes likened to bereavement. For those who have until recently been more or less active supporters of the Conservative Party, feelings of loss have been compounded by feelings of political abandonment – some voted against the Conservatives in June 2017 for the first time in their lives. Others have spoken of being ashamed now to be British. Several make a point of referring to themselves as 'immigrants' and one or two are applying, or are planning to apply, for Spanish citizenship. Most have become very engaged in the politics of Brexit, either as keen observers or activists.

'I am seriously worried about how Brexit will affect me and my family and am upset/angry that we are being subjected to this': I hear these narratives most frequently among people recently retired or approaching retirement and who have limited economic means – people who did their sums and sold up in the UK in anticipation of a better quality of life in Spain, and have been hit hardest by the post-referendum decline in the pound. However, I have also heard this narrative among younger people concerned that they are going to find themselves disadvantaged in an already highly competitive labour market, or worried that it will result in a dramatic increase in how much it would cost for them or their children to study in the UK.

These narratives are also permeated by loss, sadness and fear and by attempts to grapple with questions about belonging thrown up by Brexit. Several of the people who share this view have become actively involved in campaigns either against Brexit or to protect citizens' rights post-Brexit.

There are however a number of common themes that emerge in one form or another across almost all of the interviews so far.

- **'We still know pretty much nothing'**: Regardless of people's views on Brexit, most are in agreement that negotiations are moving at a glacial pace and they still know very little about how it might affect them. Even where there have been announcements around issues such as [healthcare](#), many give little credence to such statements.
- **The paperwork scramble**: Everybody I have spoken to has, or knows somebody who has, been busily trying to get their paperwork in order – usually registering as a resident or sorting out their tax affairs. This is often a source of anxiety for those involved, not least because people tend to receive [inconsistent advice](#). It is occasionally also a source of *Schadenfreude* for those telling me about British neighbours who have been 'going under the radar' for years in the hope of avoiding paying tax in Spain.
- **Planning to stay put**: For those who think that Brexit is unlikely to change much, there is of course little reason to consider leaving Spain. But even among those who are deeply worried about the possible impacts of Brexit, most have expressed their determination to stay put. For some this is at least partly about fears that they simply cannot afford to move back to the UK. For most it is bound up with deeply-held feelings that Spain is now their home.
- **The B-word**: I have met very few people who do not have a story of a Brexit-related row or falling-out. With a few exceptions, however – mainly those involved in Brexit-related campaigning – Brexit has now become less of a focus of attention than it was before and the emotional intensity has also waned somewhat. Yet even now most are wary about who they speak to about Brexit, if they speak about it at all. Some of the more staunch Remainers have sought out groups such as [Bremain in Spain](#) where they can discuss Brexit without being called traitors; most of the Leavers I have met have identified who not to speak to if they want to avoid being told they are racists; and many tell me they just try to avoid the topic altogether – in relatively small communities where people often only have a limited circle of friends and acquaintances, as is often the case in 'expat' communities, the social and economic costs of political arguments can be felt particularly keenly.

The uncertainty continues.

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Note: This article originally appeared at our sister site, [LSE Brexit](#). It gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. 'Costa del Brexit' is funded by the British Academy. It comprises repeat interviews with British people living in Spain, primarily in Mallorca and the Costa Blanca, during the course of the initial two years of Brexit negotiations.

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