

From Spain to New York, concern grows over the role

Donkey village in death ride uproar

BEING FINGERED as the cruellest village in Spain has upset the folk of Villanueva de la Vera.

'Donkeys! Bloody donkeys!' storms Emilio San Miguel, proprietor of the village bar. 'Next the big softies in Madrid will be arresting Don Quixote for letting Sancho Panza ride one,' he says to applause from the assembled company.

'Burro' has become a dirty word in Villanueva de la Vera, a mountain village in the western province of Cáceres. Next week they celebrate the ancient festival of Pero Palo which brings flocks of tourists from Britain and the rest of Europe to this remote spot.

Tempers are running high here, however, because a tradition which has become a source of income appears jeopardised by the animal protection lobby.

In a full-page advertisement in national newspapers, the Animal Rights Defence Association condemned the people of Villanueva de la Vera for their inhumanity.

The claim is that during the festival of Pero Palo, a fat man rides the oldest donkey in the village until it literally drops beneath him. The village children jump on board for good measure to ensure the beast has absolutely no chance of survival.

'I have lived here for 56 years and never has a donkey died during our festival,' says San Miguel.

A little probing and he is prepared to water down this statement with the endorsement of his drinking

CARMEL FITZSIMONS reports from the Spanish mountain community of Villanueva de la Vera.

companions. 'OK, unless of course it is a very, very infirm donkey and then it would be a terrible accident. We never kill donkeys deliberately,' he says with some bravado.

The village's attitude to the animal rights campaigners is simple and proudly dismissive. San Miguel's son, José, points to his forehead and mutters, 'Loco'.

In Madrid, Jorge Roos of the Animal Rights Defence Association, is used to being regarded as a lunatic by some of his compatriots. Sympathy for animal rights campaigners is limited in the land of the bullfighter.

He explains that each year the association chooses a specific target in its drive to alert Spaniards to the issue of animal cruelty.

'Last year we highlighted the brutality in Corria where a bull is killed by the populace who blow darts at it until it bleeds to death. While it still lives its testicles are cut off as a trophy. It is a disgusting display of misplaced machismo,' he said.

Roos does not believe the disclaimers by the villagers of Villanueva de la Vera. He is certain that the donkey does die and that it is part of a ritual re-enactment of Christ's ride to Jerusalem.

'Spain is a country where the poor people have been dominated for so long that they have a very deep need to dominate someone or something else themselves. Often it is the animals—bulls and donkeys—which end up as our victims,' he said.

He says the association is campaigning against the glorification of cruel Spanish traditions. It fears that brutality towards animals is being sold to tourists as part of Spain's cultural heritage.

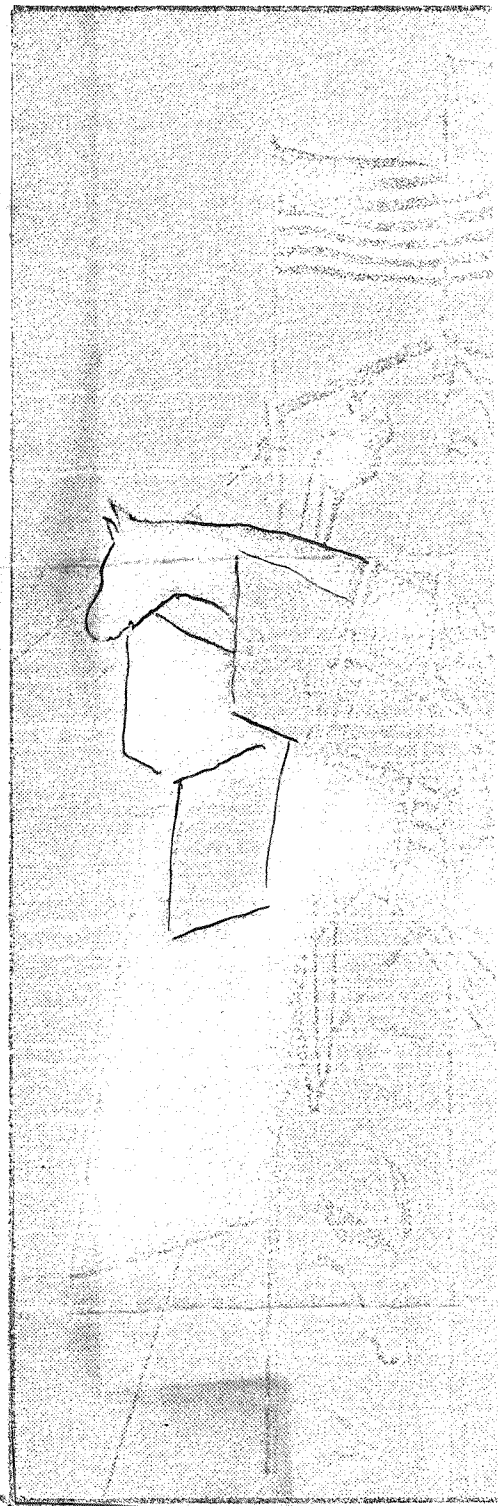
'In the North, there is a festival where they string a goose upside down across a river and the young men row out and try and break its neck by hanging from it. How can this be a tourist spectacle? It is a nightmare.'

'We are very good to our burros' says the woman. She quotes a local proverb which, roughly translated, says 40 pairs of shoes are still not enough to outwear the hooves of a hardworking donkey.

Already in the village, this year's crop of hire cars from Madrid is beginning to appear. Tourists may exclaim over the quaintness of the village streets and the people's customs. But they will soon be able to judge whether Jorge Roos and the animal right protesters are tilting at windmills or not.

The RSPCA yesterday asked Spain to ban the donkey crushing at Villanueva de la Vera.

The RSPCA said it would seek legislation through the European Parliament if the Spanish Government refuses to act. The RSPCA is also protesting to the Spanish Tourist Board and Euro-MPs.



RSPCA 'barbarism' plea

CRUELTY to animals is a common feature of Spanish fiestas. 'Blood fairs,' as they are known to animal lovers, have a history in Spanish culture dating back to medieval times, writes David Adams.

One British expert, Barrie Tracey, returned last week from Spain where, for the past five years, he has been studying the festival traditions involving barbaric cruelty to animals.

His curiosity was first aroused in

1982 when he witnessed the stoning of small animals tied to stakes—including rabbits, doves, chicken and ducks—at the February fiesta of Los Llanos de la Cruz in Southern Spain.

In 1985 the Governor of Malaga issued a proclamation banning the stoning but it took the presence of the Guardia Civil at last year's festival and the threat of heavy fines before local people reluctantly accepted the ruling.

Mr Tracey has now compiled a list of cruelties taking place at some

50 fiestas where barbaric acts on animals are a major attraction. In one village, a goose is strung up across the village square and horsemen compete to pull its head off. In another, chickens and turkeys are clubbed to death by blindfolded men.

In the villages of Ciruelas and Cifuentes in the Guadalajara region, calves are pursued across country by tractors until they are crushed to death, Mr Tracey claimed.

At Igea in La Rioja every November young calves are thrown

from a platform which is raised until the animal falls. Elsewhere, balls of fire are thrown at bull's horns and they are run in fear until they drop.

'Wherever there are cruelties the various local and international animal welfare groups do try to draw attention to it. It is impossible to monitor all the places,' said Mr Tracey.

Tracey believes the Government is seriously tackling the problem. 'The Government is very aware and sensitive the people are also aware,' he said.

Cruelty to animals is not new to Spanish fiestas. In the