

Twinkle Trust Fuerteventura's cat carers



Credit: Hagit

□ By Karl McLaughlin

In a previous edition we featured a Tenerife teacher whose summer holiday this year consisted of a gruelling fortnight on the Way of St James in northern Spain, equipped with a rucksack and walking boots.

Since then our attention has been drawn to another form of vacation which merits inclusion in the 'holidays with a difference' category, in this case holidays designed to make a difference.

During the last decade and a half, a small and highly committed group of UK residents have been devoting part of their holiday time in Fuerteventura not just to topping up tans but to the welfare of hundreds of stray cats who roam the island. What started out as an individual contribution to assisting the feral felines has become almost a way of life for those involved, who have answered an SOS call by a UK-registered charity that does silent but important (and often life-saving) work for Fuerteventura's cat population.

The long-standing commitment dates back to 1995 when Jenny Billimore visited the island for a holiday and was immediately struck by the number of cats around, many of them in pitiful condition. Jenny openly admits the spectacle caused her great distress, although not even she could have guessed just how much: "Little did I



Beverly and Emma Sadler travel over from the UK at least once a year to offer their services

know at that time how my life was about to change forever. Throughout the week we witnessed countless cats and kittens dying in the grounds of the holiday apartments. Most of them looked as though they were suffering from cat flu and many of the kittens had such badly infected eyes they could not open them. At first we tried to help by putting down some food each day and washing the kittens'

eyes, so at least they could see, but each day we found more and more in need of help. We knew without veterinary treatment many of them were going to die."

Jenny returned to Fuerteventura within a month of her first trip and was more distressed to find that the cat she had taken an interest in was at death's door due to flu: "I had tried to enlist the support of animal welfare organisations in the UK but they all

said they had no resources to tackle the problem so I decided to do something myself. I took it upon myself to find some volunteer vets and helpers and raise the money for a cat sterilising trip if the complex owner would help me get permission.

The owner not only helped me gain permission from the local authorities in Fuerteventura but he also offered us free use of some accommodation and a place

to carry out the operations." Once back in England, Jenny mobilised her friends to do something to alleviate the plight of the cats, launching an organisation called Twinkle Trust, named after a cat she had grown very fond of during

We rely on a handful of people and **it would help if more people would get involved**

her first holiday. The initiative has since blossomed into a full-blown operation which arranges sterilisation campaigns twice a year to keep the cat numbers down, giving the surviving ones a better chance of survival.

The organisation depends on the generosity of donors, although not all the help given is financial. An apartment complex provides free accommodation for the volunteer vets, veterinary nurses and other helpers during the visits to help keep costs as low as possible. Others help out from further away, including some from very high up, literally. Among the activists raising money for the cat-care initiatives is daring campaigner Laura Lacey, who is taking part

in a sponsored sky-dive in England. The dive was due to take place earlier this month but has had to be rescheduled due to strong winds on dive-day. Laura has set herself the target of raising £1,500 for the cats.

The work done by the Surrey-based charity has been acknowledged locally as making an important contribution to keeping the feral cat population under control. However, the job is not all about sterilisation. The Trust asks volunteers to help with the running of their unique Cat Cafés, which are food and water shelters (with information sheets in three languages explaining their purpose) that ensure strays are fed at a fixed spot and are therefore not forced to rummage in the bins for food. Holidaymakers who agree to help out are asked to give up a small amount of their vacation time to clean the Cat Cafés and top them up with water and food, which is supplied to them on arrival if necessary, although many also buy their own supplies.

Volunteers are also asked to report on the progress of the sterilised strays, which are easily identified because the tip of one ear is lopped off during the brief operation under anaesthetic. A well-organised reporting system helps new and/or sick strays to be located relatively quickly so that help can be provided. Ex-pat residents willing to make a longer-term commitment can offer their

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