

VIP fleas

Do nothing hastily but catching of fleas.

Thomas Fuller

When European rabbit fleas from Britain proved unable to colonise the arid interior of Australia, the Australian Meat and Livestock Corporation (now called Meat and Livestock Australia) was keen to support further research that could provide alternative ways of stopping the resurgence of rabbits. A plan was devised with entomologist Dr Peter Bailey from the South Australian Department of Agriculture to initiate work in Almería, the most arid region of Spain. Fleas from rabbits in that region seemed to offer the best prospects for finding new, arid-adapted vectors to transmit myxomatosis in inland Australia.

Unfortunately, nobody behind this new venture had anticipated the likely consequences of an invasion of suburban Adelaide by accidentally introduced Portuguese millipedes. This was further compounded by a looming election in the state of South Australia. Politics intervened in our research planning and the work on fleas came to an abrupt halt. Peter Bailey was asked to go to Lisbon, Portugal, to figure out a solution for the millipede problem, and we were left with a project without an expert entomologist to see it through. Nonetheless, because I had developed considerable experience in laboratory rearing of European rabbit fleas, a solution to the problem seemed obvious. I discussed the possibility with my wife Pam and two daughters and we took the plunge. The quickness of the decision left us only a few weeks to prepare and we anticipated baptisms by fire into Spanish language and culture on arrival in Spain.

At the time we thought it might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit Europe and live and work in Spain, so we made the most of it. I went ahead to get the project going while Pam, Natalie and Julia came a few weeks later, stopping over in London, then having a day or two in Paris before catching the train to Madrid. While they were in Paris, radioactive clouds from Chernobyl drifted across France, causing great consternation, although, with so many things to do and see in big cities, it was just another thing for awed five- and eight-year-olds to remember.

I had travelled up to Madrid from Seville to meet the family. When the train pulled into Madrid-Chamartin at the end of their 16 h journey from Paris it was a great thrill as I caught sight of them through the window as the train came to a stop. Pam was equally relieved that she no longer had the sole responsibility of manoeuvring two small girls and luggage through some of the world's busiest cities and transport hubs. Refreshed with sleep, we had a stroll along the Paseo del Prado the next morning before catching the train to Seville.

Key to the success of work and life in Seville was my still-growing friendship with Ramon Soriguier, who I had met years earlier at a conference in Canada. Ramon helped enormously by organising accommodation in Seville and laboratory space at the Estación Biológica de