

Harry Happe's villa enjoys an almost unrivalled position above Lake Viñuela. The property, 285 metres above sea level, enjoys stunning views of this usually huge expanse of water, although when I visited recently the water levels were, worryingly, as low as I have ever seen them.

However, it wasn't to reflect on a possible forthcoming water shortage that I was paying a call, but to talk about Harry's passion in life. His website malageweather.com is an incredibly popular weather-forecasting service which he has been operating for four and a half years, and which had just received its one-millionth "hit" on the internet.

Harry comes from a disaster management background in Germany, and when he moved to Spain he was less than impressed with the accuracy of the weather forecasting service in operation at the time. This facility has since been taken over by the National Meteorological Office which has raised standards considerably, but by then he had started posting small weather warnings on the website of his PC servicing company.

It wasn't long before word got around that a reliable service was available on the internet, and one which enjoyed a higher degree of success in accurately forecasting local conditions. However Harry was quick to make the point to me that due to the location of the Costa del Sol and the terrain involved, local conditions can vary tremendously over quite small distances.

Two cases in point occurred last year. The huge floods that affected areas such as Nerja and La Herradura, following the torrential rains of September 21, were not repeated a few kilometers up or down the coast from these epicenters. Indeed, there was only the occasional rumble of thunder to indicate that anything unusual was occurring a short distance away. This was also the case when a violent hail storm hit the Algorrobo area on Christmas Eve, wiping out large areas of vegetable and fruit production and causing damage estimated at 9 million Euros. Nerja, only 15 kilometres away, merely suffered the inconvenience of heavy rain for a few hours, while westwards on the motorway icy particles were quickly piling up by the roadside.

Despite these local variations the number of hits continued rising sharply, and it soon became obvious that sharing the site with the requirements of his business was no longer a viable option. And so the English language website, www.malagaweather.com was born.

All of the information is available in German (www.malagawetter.de) and Spanish (www.meteomalaga.com) and each site offers direct access to the others.

A whole wealth of weather related topics is available on the sites including marine weather, a fire tracker facility, European weather details and even a webcam facing NNW up the lake. This provides a picture of Lake Viñuela which is updated every five minutes.

There is also a photo gallery which has some dramatic shots taken over the years by Harry, mad also a number submitted by internet contributors. One of my favourites is the helicopter and the pool - turn your back for a few minutes and you could be paddling rather than swimming in your own back garden!

The number of hits increases three-fold when rain is forecast, as people try to plan around the weather for all sorts of outdoor activities, from going to the beach to having a barbeque. From now on however as the fine summer conditions settle in, things tend to get quieter.

One of Harry's major successes was predicting a violent storm that occurred in the Viñuela area during March 2007. A station-record wind-speed of 117kph (over 70 mph) was recorded, but because this astute individual had posted warnings on the weather sites, and made contact with a number of his friends, a lot of people were able to take precautions, minimizing and even preventing damage.

If harm does occur due to property as a result of the weather conditions Harry is able to provide the owner's insurance company with details of the prevailing circumstances at the time. For this increasingly popular service a small charge is made, and this, along with the revenue from advertising on the sites, (not surprisingly his PC servicing company is the first advert you'll

see) goes towards helping to maintain and renew the complex equipment needed to run the operation.

And finally, back to that webcam overlooking the lake. Not everyone views this facility favourably it seems, as in the case of the chap who, with a few of his mates, was meant to be working on laying a new patio at his house in the area. When his wife phoned him from her workplace in Málaga to find out how progress was going, hubby replied that the weather was completely wrong for laying tiles, and that they were all just off for a pint or two at the village bar. Unfortunately, before phoning, the missus had just looked at some perfect tile-laying weather pictures provided by Harry's webcam, and needless to say the end result was a hastily cancelled visit to the local.....