

## Case Study

# La Pariera, espacio rural

Flats from outside (photo by Juan Carlos Muñoz Flores)

## 1. Introduction

After the COVID-19 lockdown, Antonio Rodríguez, Rodri, left his job as a nurse in the ICU of a hospital in Murcia to fulfil a dream: to return to the small village where he grew up and become a sheep shepherd. He took over the family business, as his father was retiring.

But he went further: he fitted out one of the houses in the village, family property, to set up tourist flats (the only ones registered as “agrotourism” in Andalusia until then) and now he combines both activities. In addition, in May 2023 he became the mayor of Santiago-Pontones, the municipality where *La Pariera, espacio rural* is located.

### NAME OF THE BUSINESS

La Pariera, espacio rural  
(Antonio Rodríguez  
García), A/JA/00159.

### LOCATION

El Cerezo, Santiago-Pontones,  
Jaén, Andalucía, Spain.

## 2. About the agrotourism

El Cerezo is a village of only 117 inhabitants (on 01/01/2022). It is located in the municipality of Santiago-Pontones (Jaén), in the Segura mountain range, 1 400 metres above sea level, in a fertile plain of fresh orchards in an eminently rural environment. The territory is an important livestock farming area, especially for the breeding of ‘segureño lamb’ (a native breed of lamb under a PGI) and fighting bulls. Other important economic activities in the immediate surroundings are forestry, inland tourism, hunting and fishing.

El Cerezo is located in the heart of the Sierras de Cazorla, Segura y Las Villas Nature Park. This protected area, the largest in Spain and one of the largest in Europe (209 762,7 ha), is home to an impressive wealth of landscape, ecology and culture, with the presence of numerous animal and plant species of interest, which has led to its declaration as a Unesco Biosphere Reserve and a Special Protection Area for birds. This mountainous environment, full of spectacular ravines, beautiful valleys and arrogant peaks, offering idyllic landscapes, is the cradle of two of Spain’s main rivers: Segura and Guadalquivir.

Rodri in La Pariera, espacio rural (photo by Juan Carlos Muñoz Flores)



## When did the agrotourism business start?

October 2019.

## Number of workers

**Livestock:** 2 people, full-time.

**Accommodation:** 1 person (20 hours/week).

## Some tourist data from the agrotourism

*La Pariera, espacio rural* consists of 5 flats, with a total capacity for 22 people. Although they are independent accommodations, they have common areas that can be shared by guests from different groups.

The owner does not keep an exhaustive register of the guests, so we can only note some general features about the clientele: they are mostly Spanish guests (95 %), coming mainly from Región de Murcia (50 %), Andalucía (mainly from Málaga) and Castilla-La Mancha (Albacete and Ciudad Real); 30–65 years old people, mainly families with one or two children and groups of friends; men and women alike; lovers of hiking or other mountain sports, astrotourists (the nature park has been declared a Starlight reserve).

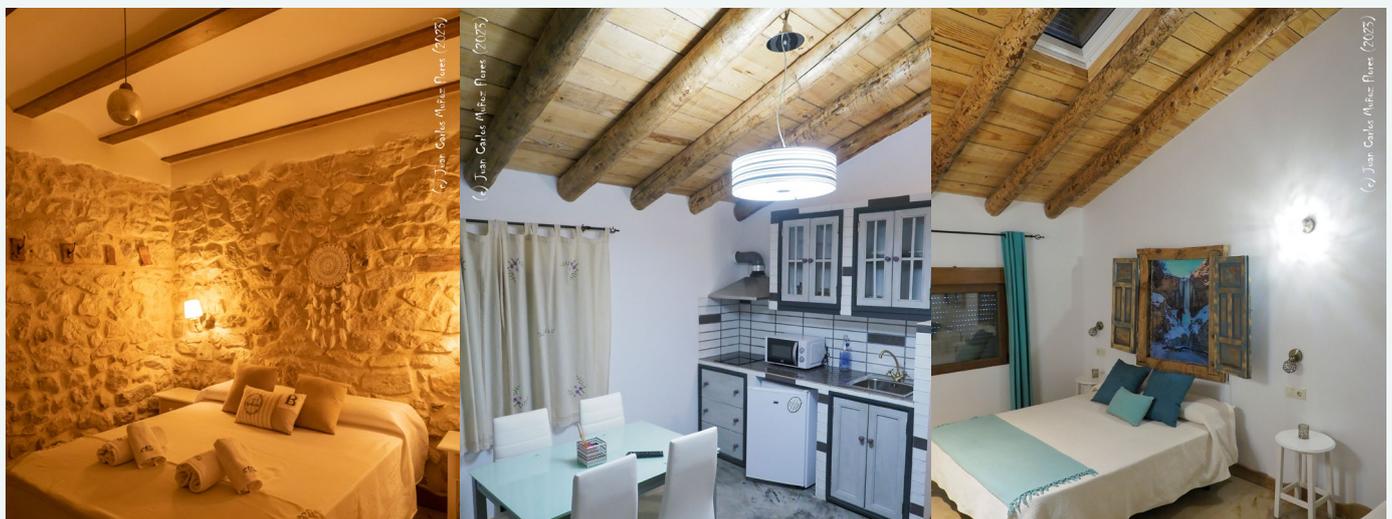
The accommodation is open all year, from Monday to Sunday.

Accommodation only (a breakfast with 0 km. products –organic eggs and tomatoes, bread, sponge cake, etc.– is available for an extra charge).

No minimum stay.

No minimum occupancy. The flats are rented as a whole, although in the case of a single guest, a discount is applied to the rate.

No extra organised activities are offered, but guests usually participate in the daily herd tending if they wish to do so.



Inside the flats (photos by Juan Carlos Muñoz Flores)



Swimming pool (photo by Juan Carlos Muñoz Flores)

## About commercialization

At first, he used Booking.com but he did not like the way the system worked. Apart from the 15 % commission for the portal, he considers the site to be unworkable, corseted, with an imprecise algorithm (for example, it placed the accommodation in another province), he does not like the way the rates, reservations, last-minute cancellations, etc., are managed. So now they only manage reservations directly (by phone).

There are no different rates for high and low season. Occupancy is pretty homogeneous throughout the year, as the tourist attractions of the territory are varied and, at any time of the year, travellers can find an incentive to visit this area.

## About advertising

In terms of advertising strategy, *La Pariera, espacio rural* is a business based essentially on “word of mouth”, that is, personal recommendations among customers and their acquaintances. In addition, many of the guests are repeaters (some customers even come three times a year).

There is no website to promote its activity and make bookings. A 3D reconstruction of the accommodation carried out by professionals is available on the Internet: [https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=-FVCxZYkLtVc&fbclid=IwAR3OLO41\\_j3Za8OuVvPSO8R-Y-eVpgtf2l-8YJ3eUgnxqTvHQHUlll\\_1\\_THg](https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=-FVCxZYkLtVc&fbclid=IwAR3OLO41_j3Za8OuVvPSO8R-Y-eVpgtf2l-8YJ3eUgnxqTvHQHUlll_1_THg).

It is also on Facebook ([facebook.com/lapariera](https://facebook.com/lapariera)) and Instagram ([instagram.com/lapariera](https://instagram.com/lapariera)), although Rodri only posts content from time to time. Rodri shares very interesting videos showing fragments of his daily tasks, whether he is taking care of the animals or showing us the accommodation or its geographical environment.

At the time, promotional brochures were published. The term ‘agrotourism’ appears, although there is no particular emphasis on the participation of guests in the farm’s tasks.

He has occasionally sponsored some events, thus promoting his logo in return for a financial contribution. He has participated in some promotional activities in cooperation with newspapers (*Diario de Jaén*), but he has stopped participating because it does not seem to be an effective action for his business.



Identification sign of the accommodation (photo by Juan Carlos Muñoz Flores)

## About starting up the business

Rodri studied Nursing at the University of Jaén. After working and living in several cities in Spain and abroad, he started working as a nurse in the ICU in Hospital Clínico Universitario Virgen de la Arrixaca (Murcia).

His father, a sheep shepherd, told Rodri that he was going to retire and sell his livestock. He then decided to take a leave of absence from work to fulfil his dream: returning to his village, being a shepherd and running a rural accommodation, all at once.



Flock of segureña sheep in La Pariera (photo by Juan Carlos Muñoz Flores)

He had seen many times in his village how the fruit of a lifetime's work and effort in selecting the sheep and looking after the flock was forgotten for lack of generational replacement, and he didn't want that to happen at home.

And so it all began. First, he took the agricultural training courses for young farmers (eight training modules, lasting two and a half months, including some complementary courses, for people under 40 years of age who are entering farming). As a result, he was eligible for a grant of €55 000 (non-refundable) and CAP entitlements. The procedures were carried out through COAG-Jaén, of which he is a member. In June 2019 he took charge of the flock: he owns about 480 sheep of segureña sheep (an autochthonous breed with a Protected Geographical Indication) and his father, about 210. They also own 10-12 goats, which act as wet nurses. The bulk of the flock grazes freely on communal land (between the valley of Santiago and Campos de Hernán Pelea), while the lambing ewes and lambs are kept on the farm. They lamb three times a year: in January, April and September.

In order to start the tourist activity, in May 2018 he began the refurbishment of a family-owned farmhouse (owned by his great-uncles), located in El Cerezo village, a few metres from where his parents live, to set up tourist flats. The house has been restored following the architectural typology of the area (cement floors, original stone walls, "revoltones" roof, etc.), providing it with services and facilities for the clients (underfloor heating and cooling, air conditioning, wifi, kitchen with complete kitchenware, private bathroom, etc.). Each flat has been given a name that evokes the rural past of the house: "La Tiná", "La Cámara", "El Granero", "El Pajar" and "El Aprisco". "La Tiná" is adapted for people with reduced mobility. It is the only rural accommodation with a swimming pool in the surrounding area, and some common areas for all guests (dining room, barbecue, garden, etc.) are also available.



Inside the flats (photo by Juan Carlos Muñoz Flores)

The remodelling cost around €260 000 (€60 000 over the initial budget), as the house was completely refurbished. To finance it, Rodri has relied on his savings, a bank loan and partial financing from EU funds managed by the GDR Sierra de Segura (a local action group), as well as the help of family members to cover the over-budget cost.

Applying for the grant has been a very complicated and tedious process, which has required the most effort. The project to be funded amounted to €221 000, 50 % of which was initially to be granted. The amount of the grant was reduced to €56 000 due to problems with justifying the work's progress. In addition, the process was a bit complicated and an appeal was needed in order to finally access the funds.

Furthermore, Rodri considers this type of aid is impractical: you cannot apply for the subsidy unless you own the full budget (as the economic plan would not be viable). Thus, it is not useful for the majority of entrepreneurs; the bureaucratic procedures are very arduous (he applied in January 2018 and the provisional decision took a year, and when he had to appeal against the granting of the aid, everything was delayed even more). He argues that political interests in the local action groups exist, etc.

He also applied for a discount on the building permit to renovate the house (around €6 500), but the town council plenary voted against it, even though Rodri maintains that the activity meets all the legal requirements to have been funded.

The flats opened to the public in October 2019. Barely six months later, the Spanish Government decreed the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic and tourist activity was interrupted until the summer of 2020, when the flats were able to reopen.

Before starting this business, Rodri had neither academic training or experience in the tourism sector nor in the hotel industry, “but he had all his personal background”. It has been a completely self-taught process, with only help from Internet and attendance to some conferences or tourism fairs; a full-fledged business adventure.

He has not used the resources provided by the public authorities to help entrepreneurs (such as the Andalusian Entrepreneurship Centres), either. Rodri has taken care of all the administrative formalities himself.

During all this time, Rodri managed to run his three jobs: shepherd, tourist entrepreneur and nurse. He needed the help of his family to be able to do it all. But it has not been easy: his father has been against his son’s initiative from the very beginning; he refused to accept that his son should become a shepherd (“he wanted me to have a better life”), nor that he should invest so much money in the tourist business, but he still helps Rodri with the livestock.

But it was very clear to Rodri: “I came here to make my dreams come true”. Finally, in November 2020, he left his job at the hospital to devote himself entirely to sheep and tourists.



Livestock facilities (photo by Juan Carlos Muñoz Flores)

## About managing an agrotourism business

Rodri is self-employed (under two different headings, with separate accounts: livestock farming and tourism). He is taxed by direct estimation of expenses and profits, so he cannot obtain the tax benefits he would have if he were taxed only for one activity. However, as his professional activity is registered as “agrotourism”, the income from the tourist accommodation is considered as a complement to the farming activity and, therefore, Rodri is considered a “principal” farmer (+50 % of the income corresponds to the agricultural activity).

Livestock farming and accommodation are perfectly integrated in La Pariera, espacio rural. Livestock breeding accounts for 60 % of the family income and tourist accommodation for 40 % (there may be fluctuations depending on the year: e.g. during the pandemic, it was 90 % tourism-10 % livestock breeding). Rodri did not start his business “to get rich”, but both activities allow him to live comfortably so far, with a higher income than in his previous job as a nurse. His aim, from the very beginning, was to diversify his sources of income, “not to put all the eggs in one basket”.

But there is more: guests choose this accommodation mainly because it is next to the “tiná” (the barn), because they can share the daily life with a sheep shepherd. Rodri does not organise activities for tourists, he does not modify the dynamics of the farm because of guests (“I don’t do theatre for tourists”). He does not commercialise the fact that he is a livestock farmer because he does not have the logistics to professionalise the agrotourism aspect.

Thus the presence of the farm is a complement for the guests in the flats, an added value. But he is always ready to be accompanied by guests who wish to do so. Some (around 20 %) even ask to go with him to the mountains, where the bulk of the flock grazes, and all without exception, at some point, go to the barn where the pregnant ewes and the lambs are or even accompany them on their daily walk.

He has occasionally organised some activities, such as workshops to make homemade bread (on demand, in cooperation with an active tourism enterprise).

The tourism business is managed directly by Rodri. He currently has the help of his sister (with the bookings) and a person is employed as a cleaner (20 h/week). Rodri was elected mayor of his municipality, Santiago-Pontones, in the last elections (May 2023). After a few months of combining his three professional activities, he is considering employing a shepherd to look after the sheep, as his father is now 73 years old and can no longer help him as much as he has done so far.

In terms of training needs for agrotourism, Rodri believes that anyone who wants to start a business must have basic knowledge: knowing how to formulate a feasibility plan, a business plan, a SWOT analysis, having a minimum knowledge of e-admin, office automation, etc.

“Even if you hire the services of professionals, you must know how to act. And, once the business is up and running, marketing and social networks are very important”, he says. Rodri has found that every time he uploads a video to his Facebook page, bookings increase.

On the other hand, Rodri identifies the following skills as necessary for entrepreneurs in agrotourism: having a tolerance for chaos, knowing that there are no timetables, having social skills (“you can’t just hand over the key to the guests and walk away; you need to get more involved”).

As for future expectations for the business, Rodri is optimistic: he didn’t start the business to get rich but to be able to live with dignity, and so far he is doing well.



Livestock facilities (photo by Juan Carlos Muñoz Flores)

# Advice for new entrepreneurs

“To be a rural entrepreneur, the first thing is to know if you are capable of living in the countryside. It is basic, an obvious thing, but it is essential to keep it in mind: you have to be tolerant to isolation, to not having access to the services you are used to in the city, although the Internet is universalising everything”.



Livestock facilities  
(photo by Juan Carlos Muñoz Flores)



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(photo by Juan Carlos Muñoz Flores)

“If you wait until you have all the certainties to undertake a project of this magnitude, you will never move forward. You have to take the plunge, take risks, because you will never have absolute certainty. Nor is it a question of being unconscious: you have to do things well, but think twice and not five times”.

“My business is not only good for me: it is also good for the small local businesses in my village (the bar, the shop, the market, etc.). Here tourists fraternise with the locals, not only with other tourists”.



Livestock facilities  
(photo by Juan Carlos Muñoz Flores)