

safe community



by David Thomas

features@algarveresident.com

David Thomas is a former Assistant Commissioner of the Hong Kong Police, consultant to INTERPOL and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. He has recently formed *ISECA The Independent Security Agency* here in the Algarve to help authorities and the community prevent crime

Security: living in rural areas

There is little doubt that the Algarve has an abundance of attractive scenery and beautiful rural areas where people have chosen to live.

Rural Portugal offers many attractions in terms of traditional culture, food, peace, tranquillity and much more.

Unfortunately, in recent years, criminals have also moved in and have targeted residents living in rural areas. The reason is simple – they know that many properties offer little in the way of security and that the emergency services and private security (if the property is alarmed) can take some time to respond. This can put those living in such areas at risk.

This article explores ways in which that risk can be reduced so we can all continue to enjoy our lifestyle here in the Algarve.

Indoor residential robberies involving the use of violence are one of the most horrific crimes and when these occur, the question is often asked: is the Algarve still a safe place to live?

Thankfully, however, the frequency of this type of crime is low and, as such, the risk is also low. More common are burglaries particularly when the property is empty.

The majority of indoor residential robberies are the work of non-Portuguese gangs. They are not afraid of confrontation and inflicting violence when they wish to do so.

Burglaries on the other hand are more often locals, either drug addicts or opportunists. Most do not want confrontation; simply to break in and steal whatever they want and leave as quickly as possible.

With indoor robberies the situation is different in that the robbers will often attempt to extract from the occupants information regarding their bank pin codes, safe combination etc. This prolongs the attack which can go on for several hours. The greatest fear in these situations is how long it will last

and what the outcome will be. However, the knowledge that help in the form of an emergency response is on its way can greatly reduce the degree of trauma in such circumstances and bring the attack to an end.

So what can be done to minimise the risk?

Physical security

Properties are usually, but not always, targeted for a reason. This can range from simply presenting an opportunity because an occupant has left a window open, or word spreading that the property is worth breaking into – or more sinister that the occupants themselves are worth robbing.

So the first way of reducing risk is to ensure that when you leave your property all the windows are shut and doors locked. At night time, both some indoor and outdoor lights should be left on preferably connected to a timer. The alarm, if installed, should be activated.

More about securing your property can be found on the *Safe Communities Algarve* website www.safecommunitiesalgarve.com.

Neighbours

It is always wise to make friends with your neighbours if you have not already done so. Disputes should be avoided at all costs.

I have met a number of residents here in the Algarve who live in constant fear of their neighbours mainly resulting from disputes over access rights or land issues.

This has led to threats and, in some cases, violence. Falling out with a neighbour may not just involve the neighbour themselves but others in the area who are friends or relatives of the neighbour concerned – so you can see how things can escalate.

Conversely, befriending a neighbour can work wonders in terms of security by keeping an eye on each other's property.

Contractors

The next preventative step is

to always keep the number of contractors entering your home to a minimum. Use only those of good reputation who can be trusted.

Do not hand out keys unless absolutely essential. Be wary of sub-contractors who may not be known to you. Simple tricks used by criminals acting as workers are to ask to use your washroom and whilst in there open the window.

The worker then returns later at night and enters through the window if it has been left open. Do not invite outdoor contractors into your home unless you know who they are and can be trusted.

There are certainly occasions where falling out with an unscrupulous contractor has resulted in a property being burgled. If things go wrong during work being carried out on your property try to resolve this amicably.

The last point with contractors and something more difficult to control is the employment of gardeners and pool cleaners etc. These are usually honest and trustworthy people who provide excellent service often over a period of many years.

However, unintentional loose talk in a local bar – for example “my employer has just purchased a top range Mercedes” – can either be overheard or be relayed to criminal elements. The worst piece of gossip is how long an owner will be away. If you trust your contractor, it is important that he or she realises that confidentiality is essential.

Suspicious activities

Keeping a look out for suspicious persons and activities in your area and reporting such to the police is vitally important in preventing crime. I covered this in my last feature but I cannot emphasise this enough.

Police resources are often thin on the ground and they rely heavily on residents to help them prevent crime. As a resident you know what is suspicious; inform the police and they will respond accordingly.

Leaving your property empty

If you are going away on holiday or live overseas, inform the GNR at your nearest station. They will record this and step up patrols as far as resources allow.

Try to get a neighbour, even if some distance away, to check your property from time to time and, in return, help them in some way.

Safe Residence Programme

In October last year, I covered in a feature the *Safe Residence Programme* (SRP) operating throughout the Algarve. The SRP is particularly designed for those residents living in rural and isolated areas and provides close contact between residents and the local GNR. The SRP aims to:

- Provide a quick response to emergencies
- Gather information of possible movements of suspect criminals
- Facilitate the communication of information regarding crime between residents and police

- Disseminate safety advice to residents
- Target GNR resources to help prevent crimes against communities living in isolated areas
- Reduce the fear of crime caused by increases in crime in specific areas.

Due to the difference in demographics of various areas, the approach adopted by the GNR in establishing the programme and registering households is tailored to the areas concerned. In terms of the operation of the programme in emergencies, the process is standardised.

In case of an emergency, the householder concerned simply dials an emergency number, provides their name, that of the village, number of the house (only if it has been allocated one by the GNR) and states it is an emergency.

As the GNR know the location of each property, the emergency services can locate the property far quicker than before. Each team has at least one English speaking officer. Response times vary depending on distance but in the Loulé Council area for

instance this is usually between five to 15 minutes.

To find out more about the SRP in your area please contact the teams concerned as shown in the table below.

Summoning help in an emergency

One of the drawbacks summoning help through the telephone is that there may not be time to use it if suddenly attacked, as in an indoor robbery. This is where panic alarms have an advantage particularly if they are worn by the individual. However, a challenge facing alarm and intervention companies is achieving a fast response to emergency panic alarm signals to those living in remote areas, due to the number of patrol vehicles and the distances involved.

Close cooperation between police and the security industry is therefore vital. I have therefore made a written proposal to the GNR on ways to overcome this and will be discussing this with them shortly. The safety and reassurance of the public is vital.

POLICE AREA	TOWNS	TEAM TEL NO	EMAIL
Albufeira	Albufeira; Olhos D'Água Paderne	961 193 349	ct.far.dabf@gnr.pt
Faro	Estoi; Moncarapacho Olhão; São Brás de Alportel Santa Bárbara de Nexe	962 093 131	ct.far.dfar@gnr.pt
Loulé	Almancil; Boliqueime Salir; Quarteira	962 093 196	ct.far.dlle@gnr.pt
Silves	Silves; Lagoa Messines; Armação de Pêra	961 193 348 282 440 290	ct.far.dslv@gnr.ct
Portimão	Aljezur; Lagos Monchique; Portimão Odiáxere; Vila do Bispo	961 193 080 282 420 750 (24hr number)	ct.far.dptm@gnr.pt rsdterportimao@hotmail.com
Tavira	Moncarapacho (east of) Castro Marim; Vila Real Martim Longo	961 193 304	ct.far.dtvr@gnr.pt

David Thomas, Director of ISECA – the Independent Security Agency can be contacted at 913045093 or by email at info@iseca.net. More about ISECA is available on its website www.iseca.net and on Safe Communities Algarve website www.safecommunitiesalgarve.com