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*On a rocky  
Canarian  
island a once-  
dying language  
is making a  
comeback. Marten  
Pashley tries his  
hand at Silbo*

# Whistle blower

**L**A GOMERA LIES THIRTY MILES TO THE WEST OF TENERIFE. DOMINATED BY GARAJONAY, A LONG-EXTINCT volcano, the face of the 18-mile wide isle is scarred by deep, almost impossible-to-navigate, mist-filled canyons known as Barrancos. Perhaps fittingly for such a sparsely populated place, it has long had a reputation as being the most mysterious of the Canary islands. But perhaps the strangest aspect of the island is the language the inhabitants speak. A language that was described by 1<sup>st</sup>-Century Greek traders who heard it echoing across the Barrancos as, “not like a language of men, but like the birds singing”, a language almost unique on the planet, a language composed entirely of whistling—it’s called Silbo Gomero.

The origins of Silbo (the word comes from the Spanish verb Silbar meaning to whistle) and those who speak it, Silbadores, were for years obscure. What is known is that it was used by shepherds to communicate to each other from one side of the Barrancos to another, at distances of up to six miles, but what is uncertain is how it arrived on La Gomera. I am told by locals that it developed on the island itself, while scholars with the Dan Brown or Graham Hancock view of history argued (slightly



“When you are whistling Silbo, you are whistling the words themselves, it’s called an articulated language”



incoherently) that Silbo was proof that the original inhabitants of the Canaries were refugees from the mythical continent of Atlantis.

Disappointingly for fans of long lost landmasses, the truth isn’t so fantastic: experts now agree that Silbo arrived on the island with Berber tribesmen 2,500 years ago (a form of which still exists in the Mountains of Morocco). Over the past two millennia it evolved from its North African origins and adapted to Spanish when Castilian invasions brought the language to the island.

Today the language, which features four vowels and four consonants that can

be whistled in rising or lowering pitches to form over 4,000 words, is spoken by nearly 3,000 of La Gomera’s 18,000 inhabitants. But less than 15 years ago it was, as Silbo expert Eugenio Darias put it, “About to die, it had maybe five years left, 10 at most.”

The arrival of modern telecommunications in the 1960s was what put Silbo into a steep decline. With phones commonplace there was no longer any need to whistle messages across the deep ravines, and everyday use dwindled away (a longstanding joke on the island involves two shepherds who, on first getting telephones, called

each other up and whistled down the receiver). That is until the late 1990s when Darias, realizing that their unique contribution to world heritage was facing extinction, instituted a programme to give every Gomeran schoolchild lessons in the language.

“We couldn’t let the language die, so we started with the children,” explains Darias. “They learn it for half an hour a week. So far there have been few really good Silbadores but students are learning to use it and understand it,” he adds. “The kids have some difficulty at first because they think the whistling is the same as whistling the tune of a song.



But it is completely different. When you are whistling Silbo, you are whistling the words themselves. It is what we call an 'articulated language.'

Manuel Carreiras, a professor at the University of La Laguna and expert in Silbo agrees that Silbo is far more complex than simple whistling. During his research, he discovered that Silbo is processed by the same part of the brain that processes more conventional spoken languages and can be as complicated or as simple as needed. "Originally Silbo was used to communicate simple ideas that were important to isolated rural communities. Commands such as 'come quick' or 'help', but our study showed that Silbo could also be used to communicate concepts as intricate as Einstein's Theory of Relativity if needed." So, is it hard to learn? "For someone who is a non-native Spanish speaker," Carreiras explains, "It would be very very difficult to become a Silbador. There can be much ambiguity in the whistles and often the context is essential to understanding."

I set off to the La Rosas restaurant, perched in the mountains above the small town of Agulo, to find out just how hard all this whistling is. La Rosas is run by Juan Cabello who learnt Silbo from his grandfather and is where, along with serving traditional Gomeran dishes such as rabbit in spicy sauce he gives demonstrations of Silbo to visitors.

It looks relatively simple. You place a finger in the side of your mouth and use the other hand as a makeshift megaphone. You then whistle, using the finger in the mouth to alter the pitch and tone. Try as I might, and with much encouragement from Juan, I can't get a single intelligible word out. It might be just as well says Cabello, as he reckons that once you learn it, it can become addictive. "You might end up whistling details of your latest date and you wouldn't want anyone over-hearing that would you?"

One expert believes that the ways of the Silbadores could have a benefit

**"It's proven that whistles carry a lot further than normal human speech"**



Hand-to-mouth: a local silbador

to the wider world. Jeff Brent who has studied the language for over 20 years explains, "It's proven that whistles carry a lot further than normal human speech. For rescue and emergency situations the whistling language has proved indispensable to the Gomerans. A few useful, easy-to-remember whistled phrases taught in classes around the world could save countless lives."

As the sun sets behind the majestic La Garonjonay and we cut swiftly through the water towards Los Cristianos, a young man chats incessantly on his mobile phone. His friends try to attract his attention, but he pays them no attention. Finally, one exasperated friend cups his hands in the unmistakable shape of a Silbador and whistles a series of long tonal whistles. To the uninitiated it could sound like the warblings of a bird, but the man on the mobile realizes he's been told to hurry up and finishes the call.

- Visit La Rosas in Agulo, for a demonstration, Tel +34 922 80 09 16
- Hiking specialists Timah organise Silbo tours [www.timah.net](http://www.timah.net)
- Thanks to Gran Hotel Bahía del Duque. [www.bahia-duque.com](http://www.bahia-duque.com)

**GETTING THERE**  
Hydrofoils, La Garonjonay Express and Fred Olsen run daily services to La Gomera, [www.garonjonayexpres.com](http://www.garonjonayexpres.com)

## WORD OF MOUTH

**SLAVISANO, ITALY**  
Unknown outside Italy till the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, this Croatian dialect has around 3,000 speakers in the central province of Campobasso.

**LIMBURGHISH**  
Spoken by nearly 1.6 million people in the Dutch, Belgian and German border region, Limburghish is unique in Europe by being a tonal language; a trait more usually found in far eastern languages such as Cantonese.

**AAS LANGUAGE**  
Almost exclusively confined to a small area around the village of Aas in the French Pyrénées, it shares many of the same attributes as Silbo.

**KUSKOY**  
Another whistled language in an area known as "The Valley of the Birds" Kuskoy has in recent years been making a comeback.

