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A surprising sense of grandeur

Buying a Spanish property doesn't have to mean settling for a new-build villa, says Katy Pownall

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You could be forgiven for associating Spain with new-build apartments and Mediterranean-style villas. This is, after all, the land where "mature gardens" tends to mean a few trees and an established lawn.

Certainly, on the bustling Costas del Sol and Blanca - the chief prowling grounds of the Brit in Spain - nothing really existed prior to 1950. Much of these coasts were simple fishing villages before the onslaught of tourism and high-rise. Whereas we all know France is teeming with chateaux and belles demeures, our expectation of Spain is more along the lines of off-plan frontline golf apartments within driving distance of a decent beach.

Perhaps, therefore, you might be surprised to find a sandstone castle dating back to 1065, just outside Gerona, on the market.

"The British might not expect to find historical property in Spain, but there is a lot of it about, particularly in Catalonia," explains Artur Stabinski, of Fincas Exclusivas, who are selling the castle. "In terms of early medieval castles, Spain probably has more than France, whose chateaux were mainly built in the 17th and 18th centuries."

Castillo de Peratallada is a prime example of an early medieval castle, and occupies an elevated central position in the historic, sandstone, town of Peratallada, in Girona Province.

Surrounded by a vast defensive moat and incorporating diverse architectural styles from Roman to Renaissance, the castle has evolved and grown over the centuries, and now houses a luxury hotel incorporating eight elegantly appointed suites, all of which feature period furnishings.

The accommodation centres around an 11th century patio de armas (a central terrace-cum-courtyard) which is currently a highly rated restaurant. The castle underwent a massive restoration in 1964 and is now on the market for a €10m (£6.9m) though offers will be considered.

This is a little beyond the average budget, admittedly, but then the average holiday-homer doesn't require an entire medieval castle to sate his or her craving for a refined residence. Savills offer a great compromise with a unique three-bedroom property that occupies one of the towers in the exterior walls of Castellar de la Frontera.

The house has a private walled garden and a roof-terrace as well as a kitchen, living/dining room, family bathroom, shower room and cloakroom. It is one of 30 dwellings housed within the castle and is on the market for just £248,400. Castellar de la Frontera itself is a formidable building: part Roman, part 11th century Moorish, which sits 20 minutes from Sotogrande on the Costa del Sol, and offers views over cork forests towards the Straits of Gibraltar.

Somewhat more modern is the magnificent stately home offered by Montiboli Estates, Finca Marbeuf. Though the property itself dates only from the early 18th century, the estate has existed since Moorish times and has an impressive pedigree. It even boasts its own royal connections as it was given to the Marbeuf family by King Felipe V, Spain's first Bourbon king (1683 - 1746).

The 2,000-square-metre house incorporates 20 bedrooms, 18 bathrooms, and a swimming pool while the 12,000-square-metre grounds contain landscaped gardens, parkland and a chapel. Finca Marbeuf is on the outskirts of the village of Muchamiel near Alicante. It is on the market for €5.25m (£3.6m) and the agents suggest it would be the perfect setting for a boutique hotel or parador.

Stabinski concurs that this is the main purpose for such large and impressive buildings. "A few years ago, many of our clients were wealthy Americans who wanted to own a castle or manor house just because they liked having a little piece of history," he explains. "Since the dollar weakened this market has really slowed down. Now buyers are mainly investors or business people who want to run luxury hotels.

"In a beautifully decorated castle you could probably charge as much as €350 to €400 per night. Of course you would need keen business skills to make any form of profit margin on such a massive outlay, and your marketing skills will have to be honed to ensure good occupancy rates, but it can be done."

And another swift glance over Fincas Exclusivas' portfolio reveals a promising option for such a venture. Palacete D'Orsa offers an excellent location in the Vallvidrera district of Barcelona, 10 minutes from the city centre and 20 minutes from the airport. Built in 1900, what this "small palace" lacks in history it makes up for in elegance and its wonderful views over the city and sea.

Currently divided into six suites with three living rooms, there is plenty of scope for extension into the unused upper floor. Palacete D'Orsa sits on a 2,000-square-metre plot containing a garden, terraces and swimming pool. The guide price is €7m (£4.8m).