

PROPERTIES

A fortified farmhouse built with New World wealth

SANT PERE DE RIBES, SPAIN

\$7.7 million can buy a 14-bedroom 1870 home near the Catalonia coast

BY ANDREW ALLEN

It stands five miles inland from the Costa del Garraf in Catalonia, but Can Martí, an 1870 Spanish colonial-style farmhouse, is so imposing that its owners say for many years local fishermen used it as a navigation point.

With its ochre stucco facade and defensive turrets, the property, in the municipality of Sant Pere de Ribes, a 30-minute drive from the Barcelona-El Prat Airport, stands out firmly against the surrounding olive groves and cereal fields.

The scent of wallflowers and hyacinths from outside drifts through the interior of the house, which is owned by José Luis Hernández and María Dolores Alba. The couple, owners of a game and hunting business, have put the property on the market with Engel & Völkers Sitges for 6.8 million euros, or \$7.7 million.

Mrs. Alba said that the colonial background of the house's original owner, Pau Soler, a man who earned vast wealth from the sugar trade in Cuba in the mid-19th century, explains many of the property's curiosities.

Like many young men in this area, Soler, later a railway magnate and farmer, sought his fortune in the Caribbean, as there were few opportunities locally.

Those who returned as rich men from the Antilles during the period were known in Spain as *Indianos*, or *Indians*, and the houses they built, funded with New World wealth and influenced by Cuban architecture, are still referred to as *casas Indianas*.

One of Spain's most famous *Indianos* hailed from Sitges, three miles away: Facundo Bacardí, founder of the rum distillery that bears the family name.

Soler returned to Catalonia in his 40s. His determination to protect his fortune against the bandits who infested the area in the late 1800s explains the turrets that jut from each corner of the house. These are thick-walled defenses, rather than decorative fortifications, with gun slits affording commanding views of the walls.

All of the property's windows are protected with iron bars, particularly the covered porch near the main entrance, with its Havana-inspired iron grilles.



Can Martí, southwest of Barcelona, was influenced by Cuban architecture. The thick-walled defenses, including gun slits, were for protection against bandits, who were active in the late 1800s.

The 185-acre estate has 7,000 olive trees and stables for 27 horses.

The main living room has sliding wooden doors measuring five meters by three meters, or 16.5 feet by 10 feet; when opened, these offer views across Sitges and the Mediterranean.

On the other side of the first story of the house is an enclosed gallery, with views over the Garraf mountain range.

Mrs. Alba's father bought the house in the 1980s, and she recalled its being in poor condition.

"The previous residents occupied only a small part of the house, which they had turned into a kind of apartment. They abandoned the rest," she said. "Trash was piled up in some of the rooms."

The seven main bedrooms on the

second floor are set around a central staircase, and each has an alcove, an en suite bathroom and a dressing room. Wooden frames that divided the bedrooms had been ripped out.

But as the previous owners had occupied only a small part of the house, which has 14 bedrooms and a floor area of 2,500 square meters, or almost 27,000 square feet, much of the property had been left intact.

Mrs. Alba's father, a farmer and horse breeder, restored the original local stone floors, which had been stripped in some rooms, along with its surrounding estate of 75 hectares, or 185 acres, and stables for 27 horses.

These days, 7,000 olive trees produce oil of the *arbecuina* variety. A tree in the kitchen garden provides a different variety of olive, *sevillana*, for eating. "We can only water the olive trees by day, because if we water them by night wild boar are

attracted by the water and break open the tubes to drink," Mr. Hernández said.

Josep Maria Fortià, a historical architect based in the city of Girona who is an expert on *casas Indianas*, said that this house used an eclectic mix of architecture mixed with Cuban elements. These include the elaborate ironwork around the bell and palm and jacaranda trees in the garden.

Mr. Fortià said the turrets were of a Cuban military design.

On the first floor of the house are three more bedrooms, a study with English furniture and an area that is used as a private museum of horse-drawn carriages collected by Mrs. Alba's father.

Much of the house's original furniture survives, including a luxurious carved wooden commode with an adjoining bench in one of the bathrooms. The third floor has four more bedrooms and has exposed ceiling beams made of Scots pine.

Damià Peña, director of Engel & Völkers Sitges, said that although the area was associated with *Indianos*, there were few surviving *Indiana* houses to be found there.

"It will probably appeal to a horse lover, as it's set up as a stables," said Mr. Peña, who also believes the house's proximity to Sitges, a lively and artistic town, is likely to be a draw. Whereas Can Martí's price per square meter is about €2,200 (the overall asking price also takes into account the sizable estate), typical front-line properties in Sitges cost from €7,000 to €8,000 per square meter, he said.

When Soler embarked for Cuba it was precisely the poverty of Sitges and this part of the coast that led him to emigrate. This year, however, Sitges was again ranked by fotocasa.es, one of Spain's leading property portals, as the third most expensive Spanish municipality.

HOUSE HUNTING

FROM GREAT HOMES AND DESTINATIONS AT NYTIMES.COM

A 6-bedroom Victorian in southwest London

SALE PRICE

2.35 million pounds, or about \$3.6 million

This semidetached brick house, unusually wide for a Victorian townhouse at 34 feet, is in the Clapham district of southwest London. At 2,930 square feet, it has four reception rooms and six bedrooms flanking a central hallway on three floors. The home, which dates to the late 1800s, has been well maintained and retains many of its original Victorian features, including seven fireplaces, ornate cornices and pine floors, said Alix Stuart-Bruges, a director at Douglas & Gordon, the brokerage firm with the listing.

This house is within walking distance of Clapham Common, a large park, and Underground stations on the Northern and Victoria lines. Both Heathrow and Gatwick airports are within an hour's drive and are also accessible by public transportation.

The annual council taxes on this home are roughly £2,065, or about \$3,180.

BUYING BASICS

The change of stamp duty to a progressive system, which went into effect in December 2014, has dampened the London market for homes over £2 million, agents said. Buyers of homes that cost more than £937,000 will pay more transaction tax than they did previously; according to the British government's calculator, the tax on a house that sells for £2.35 million (the price for which this house is listed) would be £195,750, or about \$304,000.

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