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JENNY KEAN MEETS A COUPLE WHO
HAVE LEARNED FROM THE LOCALS AS
THEY TURNED A NEAR-RUINED TOWN
HOUSE INTO AN ARTISTS' RETREAT
WITH SPECTACULAR VIEWS



“A fit of madness”. That’s how **Andy Russell and Helen Rigby** describe their decision to buy a 300-year-old virtual ruin in Alcalá de los Gazules. But two and a half years on, they’ve realised their dream of opening a painting retreat complete with studio space, views over the Alcornocales natural park and a small pool dappled with shade from an overhanging vine.

“We were living near Tunbridge Wells,” explains Andy, “in a perfect house that even had a duck pond. We could have just spent the rest of our lives there.” Instead they embarked on an adventure which eventually led them to the hilltop white village of Alcalá de los Gazules, and the rat-infested derelict property that was to become their home.

In fact the couple spent a year searching France, Portugal and Spain for the right place to buy. Andy had been an art teacher and then worked in paint effects and interior design, while Helen was in a senior management job in the education sector. “We both also had catering experience, so we knew we had the right mix of skills to run something for people,” says Helen, “and preferably to do with art.”

As their year drew to a close, the couple still hadn’t found the right place. They had arrived on the Costa de la Luz, it was raining and then fate struck another blow when Helen broke her arm. Running out of time and money, they started to look along the coast but found it too expensive. They tried Vejer and Medina Sidonia, also with no luck, and were feeling despondent when an estate agent suggested Alcalá.

“We arrived here and immediately loved the town – it’s pretty, slightly neglected and very Spanish,” explains Helen. “We were shown this house and when we walked in the door, everything was in such a dreadful state but we just looked at each other and said ‘this is it’. Something just clicked.”

The house – known as Hostal Salada and dating back to the 18th century – had been an inn for travellers and their mules until 50 years ago. On the lower floor, at street level, was a big stable area while upstairs was the accommodation. Because it’s cut into a hillside, the upper floor also emerges at ground level at the back of the house, where a patio lies in the shadow of the old town walls.



The original features of the former coaching inn have been retained wherever possible (previous page), with a splash pool added in the shade of the old town walls (above right). The rooftop views over the Alcornocales (above left) are an artist’s dream, but the studio in the former stables took some restoring (bottom)

“We wanted a project, and that’s certainly what we got,” laughs Andy as he recalls the two years spent renovating and reforming the property. Working with two local Spanish builders, and with Helen away earning money in Britain, he gradually restored the building, learning about local techniques and materials as he went along.

“We didn’t change the structure of the building. I’m all for finding the cheapest and most efficient method of restoration. This building has worked for years just the way it is, so we could see in a matter of minutes how we could save it and make it work for us.”

So in the dining room on the upper floor, for example, the arched windows had been ruined with ugly aluminium frames and opaque glass which blocked both the light and the view. Having removed them, Andy and Helen decided to make a small arched balcony area instead, and the wooden French windows they installed have created a light, airy space which is now Helen’s favourite room in the house.





Clockwise from top left: The former stables now make a perfect studio space; The pretty floor tiles are original to the house; Andy and Helen enjoy some cool shade in the courtyard; The exotic daybeds were a bargain find at Carrefour



Andy's philosophy of making use of whatever is there extends throughout. So the couple have kept the beautiful old floor tiles which lend the tall-ceilinged rooms an elegant air. "I had to stop the Spanish builders who wanted to take them all up," Andy says. "We didn't want it all made into a brand new place without any character, which of course is what they thought we would want."

The end result is a simple but charming house that feels true to its roots. Plastered white walls contrast with the soft blue-grey of the painted doors and window frames, and furnishings are kept simple and fresh, often with salvaged furniture and fittings.

The scrubbed wooden dining table, for example, was picked up in England and restored by Andy, and the sofas in the sitting room were bargain finds at Carrefour which Helen has dressed with brightly coloured cushions and fabric for a more exotic look.

They liked the day beds so much, in fact, that they bought several and Andy re-welded them to make them into simple iron bedsteads for the bedrooms.

Upstairs now houses an apartment for Andy and Helen with separate accommodation for their art centre guests. The kitchen was built by Andy and every bedroom has its own wet room.

Downstairs the stables, with their arched ceilings, have been transformed into a perfect studio space where residential courses and day classes are held. The old wooden doors originally used for bringing in the mules can be thrown open to let in more natural light. The patio by the old town walls now provides a shady outdoor area with a splash pool for cooling off in the summer.

Going up one more level, there's a view that's enough to bring out the artist in us all. The large expanse of roof terrace enjoys uninterrupted vistas to the peaks and valleys of Los Alcornocales, Europe's biggest natural cork forest. "People who have come here to paint spend a lot of time up here," says Helen. "Artists have always loved this part of Spain because of the light, the intense colours and the contrasts of light and shade."

It's almost as if Hostal Salada was made for its current role as a painting retreat. It hasn't all been easy, however, as Helen points out. "We were very lucky but we did also do a lot of research and gave it all a lot of thought before we embarked on this. There has been some hardship – we had to live apart on and off for two years and I did jobs I didn't always want to be doing. But we think it's all been worth it. We have no regrets at all. This is home." www.paintingsinspain.co.uk

Andy's restoration tips



- Try to find recommended Spanish builders – they have local expertise and knowledge and in our experience offer a very fair price and are hard working. An added bonus is they will help improve your Spanish
- The combination of tiles from local builders or chain stores with a feature of expensive 'designer' tiles will save hundreds of euros.
- Collect a core of old, quality furniture. It will always be of use wherever you move and will add character
- During a project never throw anything away except 'real' rubbish. The piece of wood you threw out yesterday is the piece that you need today, or it is firewood for tomorrow