

CATALONIA'S CHIANTI COUNTRY

CARLA PASSINO falls in love with its verdant vistas and easy living



INTERNATIONAL photographer Steven Garforth points at the views from the balcony of the 13th-century chapel that is now his living room in Fontcorberta, near Girona, in northern Catalonia (*above*). Framed by the stone arches, a sea of trees and undulating fields stretches for miles before veering sharply up into the towering bulk of the Pyrenees' foothills. This vista alone was enough for Mr Garforth to ditch London and move to the Catalan countryside. 'Without a question, this place gives you quality of living,' he says.

With a verdant landscape and mild climate, it is a far cry from the stereotype of dusty, parched fields of rural Spain. 'I first bought here because I was driving from Portugal across Spain, and drove through brown. I got to Tarragona and started seeing green. I drove past Barcelona and started seeing the mountains—and that sold it for me,' says Mike Collins, a 20-year veteran of the Catalonian countryside and the man who renovated the Garforths' house.

The area north of Barcelona towards

Girona and Banyoles pitches itself as the new Chianti—and looking at the lush rolling hills, the narrow tracks lined with trees and the odd sprinkling of vineyards, it could easily be mistaken for Tuscany. Except the views here are often crowned by the snow-capped peaks of the Pyrenees or the glittering expanse of the Mediterranean.

'Catalonia is vastly underrated,' says British art dealer Tom Maddox, who is married to a Catalan and has been living in her family's historic country house for the past 34 years. 'You get the sea and the mountains within two hours' drive. And Catalonia has a lot of history. If you go to Empurias, you can see the Roman ruins and you can just imagine them landing there. Plus the restaurants are fantastic, and the food is easy going,' says Mr Maddox.

Despite these attractions and a lively summer rental market, the Catalan countryside is still relatively undiscovered by foreign buyers, who tend to settle for Barcelona or villages along the coast. The Garforths themselves admit they stumbled upon it by chance nine years ago, when Mr Garforth

went on a photoshoot held at Mr Collins' farmhouse and found it so impossibly beautiful that he simply had to have one for himself.

Rural Catalonia, especially the hamlets around Banyoles, has long been the preserve of affluent Spanish families. 'During summer in particular, you get high-echelon people coming here—judges, cabinet ministers, successful businessmen,' says Mr Collins.

Better air links from Girona to Britain are likely to ensure that more Britons will follow the footsteps of the Garforths and the Collinses and buy in the area. Just like in Chianti, the Catalan countryside is peppered with ancient country houses like the one owned by the Maddoxes. These properties usually belong to established local families and very rarely come to the open market, so it may be worth registering your interest with a local estate agent. As an alternative, there are a good number of old stone farmhouses—*masias*, in Catalan—which are often ripe for conversion. *Masias* usually date from the 16th century onwards, as older ones were

often built in wood or other delicate materials and rarely survived the test of time. They are often very big—easily 7,000sq ft or more—and are traditionally arranged across three floors. In the past, the ground floor was used to house animals, the first floor was where the family lived, and the top floor was used to store crops. Many conversions now tend to have the living rooms on the lower floors, bedrooms on the first and more living space, often with a terrace, at the top. They usually come with enough land to fit in a pool and a garden.

Perhaps the only drawback is that Catalan property prices are as Chianti-like as the landscape. In the Maresme, the stretch of countryside closer to Barcelona, prices for plots of land have doubled in the last few years, according to Stijn Teeuwen of local estate agents Lucas Fox (00 34 933 562 9890). 'Barcelona is becoming more expensive, so people tend to get out to get more for their money,' he says.

HOW TO GET THERE AND WHERE TO STAY

Easyjet offers daily flights from Barcelona to London, Bristol and Newcastle, and Ryanair flies from Girona to Liverpool, London, Bournemouth, Blackpool and the East Midlands. The Garforths offer a bed-and-breakfast service from September to May, as well as self-catering lets (00 34 972 576 264) in summer.

For example, Lucas Fox are asking €1.1 million for a splendidly renovated turn-of-the-century small *masia*—small by Catalan standards, that is, as it extends over 2,500sq ft—on the edge of the Maresme village of Teià.

Growth in deeper rural areas has been slower, but limited supply is pushing prices up. 'As a rule, the closer to Barcelona, the sea or the centre of a village, the more expensive the property,' says Mr Teeuwen. 'Spanish people tend to pay much more for properties on the edge of a village, and English buyers tend to prefer the countryside.'

Fully renovated *masias* crop up every now and then and tend to sell very fast. Expect to pay in the region of €1 million to €1.5 million for a large one that has been renovated to a very high standard. The alternative is to buy an unmodernised farmhouse and do it up, although derelict *masias* come to the market infrequently and hardly ever fetch less than €300,000. Mr Collins and Mr Teeuwen estimate renovation costs in the region of €1,500 to €2,000 per sq m—depending on the quality of materials used. However, you also need to factor in plenty of time to do the works. 'This is the second house we have renovated in Catalonia and we bought it in 2002,' says Mr Garforth. 'The restoration started in 2003 and the crew left in September 2004, but then it took my wife and me a further eight or nine months to make the finishing touches. But it was worth it.'



NOW AVAILABLE FOR SALE

One of the *masias* renovated by Mike Collins has just come onto the market. It is situated near Banyoles, about 15 minutes' drive away from Girona and the airport. The renovation had barely been completed when the owner had to relocate to the Far East, so the house has never really been lived in. It is an enormous *masia* of more than 7,000sq ft which Mr Collins has painstakingly restored to preserve as many original details as he could—from an old trough which he topped with glass and turned into a coffee table to a jar encased in the massive outside walls. The drawing room is spectacular, with 30ft-high ceilings, a singularly unobtrusive plasma screen and a fireplace. Details are exquisite—the lamps in the drawing room are upturned roof tiles that have been painted the same colour as the walls, so that light seems to flood out of the stone itself. The bedrooms are a masterpiece of restrained luxury, with neutral colours, beamed ceilings and lavish en suite bathrooms, which are beautifully finished in granite. What will make you fall in love with this *masia*, however, are its views. From the master bedroom, the high-ceilinged drawing room and the terrace, water sparkles blue in the infinity pool and stretches towards the horizon to merge with the green of the countryside and the Pyrenees beyond. This corner of opulent peace can be yours for just €1.6m.

For further information on this property, call Lucas Fox on (00 34 933 562 9890).



Renovating a *masia* can be as cost-effective as a new build, but harder to find