

The factory that became a family home in Puerto Soller, Mallorca Nicola Venning

Near a Mallorcan resort where the A list plays, this couple turned an old factory into a huge family home – and on a tight budget



Necessity, it is said, is the mother of invention. And never more so than when you have a big, run-down building, but a small budget with which to convert it into a family home.

As that is the situation in which Chris Strickland and Sarah Kenyon found themselves when they set about transforming an old textile factory in Soller, northwest Mallorca, it is a good job their ingenuity paid off.

Chris, 67, a retired businessman, spotted the 100-year-old factory five years ago with his first wife, a Spanish artist. The building was derelict (a cloth-dyeing operation, it had closed at the end of the second world war), but the setting was picturesque: all orange trees and olive groves, with the Tramuntana mountains as a backdrop.

They bought it for €300,000 (£225,000 at current rates) and planned to convert the 305-square-metre structure into a gallery with living space for themselves – but the couple split before this happened. Strickland decided to continue the renovation, and had already started when he met and married Kenyon, 33, who runs a local holiday-home rental business (www.kenyonstricklandassociates.com).

“It was uninhabitable, but we still moved in,” she says. “Parts had no doors or windows. Wild cats used to come and do their business on the floor. One was sick on the sofa. It was awful.”

Luckily, Strickland had plenty of renovation experience: he's revamped all the homes he's owned in 20 years on the island. He knew that such a big project would only really work if he kept costs down. "A good friend is an architect and bon vivant," he says. "He gave his advice for free, and in return we took him to Palma for good meals." Strickland also hired local craftsmen directly, rather than using a building contractor: "You save at least 30%."

When walls were knocked down, rubble, which is expensive to clear, was used as infill – both in a disused lift shaft and in an old water-storage tank, to make it shallower and suitable for a saltwater swimming pool – much to the delight of the couple's children, Amelie, 3, and Natasha, 2.

The entire building was rewired and the sandstone walls were strengthened to support a new tiled roof. As much material as possible was reused: steel beams from a demolished warehouse now support the roof of an elegant conservatory; old wooden beams were resized and cleaned up, and now support the new ceilings. Those left over became decking in a Japanese-style garden, alongside paths made of hundreds of the original bricks. "By recycling and knowing how to get things cheaper, we saved between £150,000 and £225,000," says Strickland, who reckons the project cost £375,000, including legal fees.

Today, the former factory is an airy two-storey home of about 200 square metres. The ground floor alone has five bedrooms, three bathrooms, a large living room and kitchen/diner, an open space suitable for a dance studio or gym, and a self-contained flat. The second floor has another three bedrooms and two bathrooms.

The house is a 10-minute stroll from Soller, a lovely spot that attracts the rich and famous: Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones have a home nearby, as does Andrew Lloyd Webber.

The popularity of this once remote area has risen greatly in the past six years, since a new mountain tunnel made it far more accessible; it is now a 30-minute drive from the Mallorcan capital. It is also linked by a little tram to up-and-coming Puerto Soller and its family beach, two miles away. Prices in what was once an orange-growing centre have risen steadily. Three-bed townhouses now start at £300,000.

Some of the most desirable homes are the elegant señorial (merchant) houses, boasting gardens planted with lemon and orange trees. "The last cheap one went five years ago for £208,000," says Trini Moreno, director of the Morcas International agency. "Today, it would be about £700,000."

With the education needs of their two young girls to consider, the couple have decided to move back to Britain – probably near Bath, where Kenyon's parents live – and the £1m asking price of their Spanish home reflects the recent boom in the area. But who will want to buy such an enormous place? The home definitely appeals to a "niche market", says Jan Westwood, Mallorcan associate with The Property Finders, an overseas property-search consultancy.

Even the agent selling the property agrees. “For a lot of people, it may be too much space,” says Edward Lees, a manager with Engel & Völkers in Mallorca. “But I think it’s great. A large family could live here very happily.” It would also suit someone working from home. A painter, for instance, would be in good company, as there are two other separate, independently owned buildings on the site: an artist’s studio and a blacksmith’s forge.

Strickland knows that he will miss the place when they leave. “We have a view of the mountains all the way round,” he says. “And in winter, you can see a drift of snow. It’s beautiful now.

“We have to think of our children’s future, though. It’s been great seeing it all come together, but no, I wouldn’t do it again. It’s exciting, but it’s also hard work.”

For sale for Euro 1.35 m with Engel & Völkers; 00 34 971 634488, www.mallorcasouthwest.com

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