

Winters in Spain can be cold – so Christine invested in a wood-burning stove. The trunks and coffee table were picked up in local markets



## HOUSE FACT FILE



The pretty finca is set among vineyards and almond groves

**THE PROPERTY**

Converted farmhouse in seven acres of land near Javea on the Costa Blanca, Spain

**BEDROOMS** Two

**BUYING PRICE**  
€100,000  
in 2001

**IMPROVEMENTS MADE** Totally re-built from floor

up, including clearing and tidying up almond groves and vineyard

**AMOUNT SPENT ON RENOVATION**  
€300,000

**NOW WORTH**  
€750,000

**PRICE FOR SIMILAR PROPERTY**  
€750,000

# Spanish farmhouse

Christine and David Black lovingly rebuilt a derelict finca to create the perfect holiday retreat

**Who lives here?** 'I'm Christine Black, 43, and I live here with my husband David, 44, and our son Paul, 16, for two to three months of the year. We are both college lecturers and Paul is still at school. Our main home is in Kent.'

**Why did you buy a home abroad?** 'Our dream to buy an old Spanish farmhouse (finca) started while David and I were students working over here during our summer holidays. Over the years we've returned to the place so many times that we've got to know the country really well and particularly like this area. The surrounding mountains, vineyards and almond orchards, as well as the beautiful beaches just 10 minutes drive away, make it a fabulous place to live. Javea, the nearest town, also has plenty of restaurants and shops but not many hotels, which means it doesn't get overrun with tourists, even during the peak season. We very much get the best of both worlds here – the real rural Spain combined with all the convenience of 21st century living. We also like the fact that we have various transport options available to reach this area – there are regular flights to Alicante and Valencia airports – both of which are quite close by. Also, although it's quite a long haul, we can drive to the finca – this ▶



Christine added some colour to the stairs by fitting local hand-painted tiles



▲ The country-style kitchen was made to measure by a local carpenter who also made the window shutters. The floor is fitted with hand made



► Thick stone walls keep the home cool in the summer and warm in the winter. The country-style kitchen was made to measure by a local

The country-style kitchen was made to measure by a local carpenter, who also made the window shutters. The floor is fitted with handmade terracotta tiles, which were oiled after laying

is useful when we have people coming to visit or if we need to bring things over.' **How did you find the property?** 'We saw lots of renovated farmhouses for sale in the local paper but they were out of our price range. The only way to achieve our dream was to find a derelict property and organise restoration ourselves. We saw the farmhouse in an estate agent's in Javea and thought it had lots of potential.' **What's the history of the house?** 'The property was built around 300 years ago for a farmer, his family and animals – all of



them sharing the same building. In fact, the courtyard would have been a corral with the animals feeding from a trough, which is now part of the wall beneath the kitchen window. The walls are made from local stone and the layout creates a through-draught of air to keep the house as cool as possible. The layout and materials are typical of the local area'.

**First impressions?** 'The house is approached by a winding lane almost a mile long and the only sounds we could hear were the cicadas and farmers'

tractors – it just felt incredibly peaceful and tranquil. We were told the finca had been empty for several years but didn't think it would be quite so run down – the roof had long gone, several of the walls were in a poor state of repair and the vineyards and weeds had taken over. But by the time we left we had fallen in love with the place and knew that with lots of hard work, it could be restored to its former glory.'

**What have you done?** 'Basically we virtually re-built the house from the foundations up. We could see that the

house would give us all the accommodation we needed and our goal was to keep everything as close as possible to the original. In many ways, the layout was fairly obvious – downstairs we created a large living area and a kitchen leading into the courtyard, along with a master bedroom with its own terrace. And we were able to fit a second bedroom and bathroom in what was the old loft. The first thing we did was organise a comprehensive survey to ensure that the foundations were sound and that water was accessible –

‘We were able to fit a second bedroom and bathroom in the old loft’



these two factors are what can break even the best prepared budget. Thankfully we had no problems with any of this. Full planning permission is required for radical external work – and even though we weren't actually changing the external layout, we obtained planning permission to be on the safe side. We also found out that when you renovate a ruin, a declaration of new work is required upon completion – otherwise you can be hit with a huge capital gains bill should you sell up. We would have loved to tackle some of the work ourselves but it really is important to understand local building regulations along with the different types of materials that are used over here. For all of these

reasons, we felt it made sense to hand over the work to a team of local experts.' **How did you oversee the work?** 'We were very aware of all the nightmare scenarios about building abroad so in the end we opted for a firm that was recommended by a neighbour. The company specialises in the renovation of older properties and as a first step we went to see some of their previous builds and were really impressed with the workmanship. The first thing we did was get an estimate but we'd been warned to budget for overspend. Like any restoration of an old property, unexpected problems can often arise and you need to be well prepared for this. The work took two years

to complete in total and during that time the builders were excellent and kept us fully informed throughout, although we couldn't resist visiting the property regularly to see how things were coming along – in many ways that worked out well because we really began to make friends in the area and find our feet.' **Favourite part of the house?** 'Living abroad is all about being outdoors and the great thing here is that we have outside seating areas on all four sides of the house. During the summer months we can have our breakfast in the courtyard area and then in the evening have a barbecue on the terrace that overlooks the vineyards while the sun sets. The original wells still work



The exposed beams, old doors and shutters create a real farmhouse feel.

◀ Ochre walls and exposed stonework are typical of traditional Spanish farmhouses. The bedspread, throw and cushions are from KA International (0870 011 4334)



Christine chose a neutral décor for the guest bathroom with all sanitaryware supplied by a local company

on each terrace, as do the original bread baking ovens. We like to use these to cook our own delicious bread and pizzas. Inside, I love spending time in the kitchen – in the winter months, with candles lit, it has a lovely atmosphere and we have had some great nights sitting round the table with friends and family’.

**How often do you stay in the finca?**

‘Luckily because of our jobs, we’re usually able to spend several weeks here each summer. In the winter there’s still plenty of sunshine and blue skies – one year we even had our Christmas dinner on the beach with friends in Javea. However, it can often be quite chilly so we decided to install an effective central heating ▶



▲ **The enclosed courtyard is one of many outdoor seating areas and is overlooked by the the guest room's pretty balcony**

system and wood-burning stove to get the most out of the house all year round.'

**Describe your style...** 'I wanted to create a home with lots of character, in keeping with the original building so I chose country-style fabrics and picked up traditional furniture and accessories from the markets that are held every week in the local towns, Pedreguer and Jalon. We decided on shutters rather than curtains for the windows as they are much more practical and suit the style of the house.'

**Have you done anything with the land?**

'We rent it out to a local farmer who grows grapes and almonds – both of which are bought by the local co-operatives. The revenue from the crops helps towards the overall costs of the finca – so it really is a mutually beneficial arrangement. The great thing is that the locals are only too happy to see old fincas being restored – it's good for the economy – and they're also more than happy to keep an eye on things when

we aren't here. We've found them very sociable too – especially after the odd glass of local wine.'

**Any advice for buying a property abroad?** 'It's vital to get professional advice, the Villa Shop team who arranged the sale of the farmhouse were fluent in English and helped us through the whole process – they even found us an experienced English-speaking solicitor.'

**If you've learnt one thing...** 'Spanish builders and craftsmen are genuinely helpful and can solve any problems that may occur, but you do have to get used to their relaxed way of working and time keeping. Also, even if you don't speak the language, it's always a good idea pick up a few greetings – it means a lot to them that you are at least making an effort.'

**If you could change anything?** 'Probably our jobs – that way we could spend all of our time here!'

**What's next on the DIY agenda?** 'We'd eventually like to invest in a swimming pool for the property – but we want to spend time planning the design to ensure that it blends in well with our surroundings.'

