

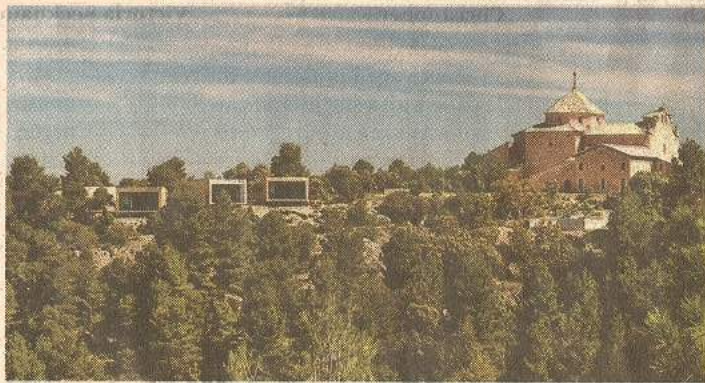
High designs

Spain | The wild and little-visited hills of Matarraña are a treat for walkers, birdwatchers – and fans of avant-garde architecture. By Paul Richardson

There was no cash machine in La Fresneda, and the nearest petrol station was half an hour away. Barely a car went by in the Plaza Mayor as lunchtime slunk away into a snoozy afternoon. Two boys played football under the stone colonnades. My morning had been busy: I'd seen neolithic tombs and olive mills and vultures. But now, with the village in siesta mode, there was nothing for it but to head out to the pools of a nearby waterfall and while away the rest of the day.

The Matarraña, tucked away at the eastern edge of Teruel province where Aragon bumps up against the southern edge of Catalonia and the northern tip of Valencia, is undiscovered even to many Spaniards. Perhaps the name doesn't help: it sounds to Spanish ears, rather alarmingly, like "kill spider" (though in fact the word is Arabic in origin, and is shared with the rushing mountain river that flows through the county).

For connoisseurs of untamed and under-the-radar European landscapes, Matarraña comes as an unexpected pleasure. Covering more than 900 sq km but with a population of 8,894 and



land cabin watching a last flame of summer sun light up distant folds of pine forest, that Consolación has lost none of its magic in the intervening years.

If for much of the 20th century the Matarraña struggled against poverty and political oblivion, in the past two decades the region has begun to reverse the cycle of neglect. As a tourist destination it's still a modest proposal – the county has just 2,200 hotel beds, but this total represents a threefold increase since the millennium.

Communications are improving: the hairpin bends of the dilapidated N232 trunk road are finally being ironed out, while the fast AP-7 motorway from Barcelona brings Catalans curious to discover this far-flung outpost of their culture. Perhaps decisively where tourism from the UK is concerned, the airport at Castellón, a 90-minute drive away, now has a regular Ryanair flight from London Stansted.

The Consolación isn't alone in blazing a trail for contemporary architecture in the region. Five miles east of Valderrobres, French developer Christian Bourdais is building a series of 12 holiday homes in a stunning wilderness setting, each created by a different international architecture practice. "The idea was to create a testimony of the architecture of today – a vision of the perfect second home," he says. "These are all potential future Pritzker Prize winners, so to have their work from the same time, together in one place, really spoke to me."

Bourdais, who runs a company staging major art events and exhibitions, as well as a gallery in Madrid, scouted locations in Italy, Portugal, Morocco and Turkey before deciding Matarraña offered the ideal combination of natural wilderness, sun and proximity to a major airport (Barcelona). "We wanted to give carte blanche to the architects, to give them the chance to explore their creative potential," he says.

To date, two houses on the 100 hectare site are complete, and available to rent. Solo Pezo, designed by Chilean studio Pezo Von Ellrichshausen, is a concrete house arranged around a central courtyard and swimming pool, the

whole building raised up on a central column so it appears to float among the surrounding trees. Solo Office, completed last year by Brussels-based Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen, is a circular house, 45 metres in diameter, designed to make the most of the views of the forested hills in all directions. Plans for forthcoming houses include an inverted concrete pyramid by Japanese practice Takei Nabeshima Architects.

Bourdais is also currently raising funds for a €25m, 35-room hotel designed by Smiljan Radčić that would act as a hub, offering catering and other services to guests in the holiday homes. Once funding is in place, he says, the whole project should be completed within three years.

Depopulation is still rampant, but locals are increasingly inclined to stay put and make their business ventures work. People like Enrique Monreal of Mas de Torubio in the village of Cretas, a family winery making juicy Pinot Noirish wines with the rare red grape Garnacha Peluda; José Antonio Higuera and Clara Lapuente of the restaurant L'Alqueria (also a tiny hotel) in picture-perfect Ráfales, where I memorably lunched on almond soup, ternasco lamb and goat's cheese ice cream baked in filo pastry; and José Ramón Moragrega of Mas de Bunyol, a "bird observatory" in the hills outside Valderrobres.

On a sparkling mountain morning I made my way to the forest clearing halfway up a crag where for nearly 30 years Moragrega and his wife Loly have been feeding the local vulture population and charging visitors for an up-close view of the spectacle. From behind a plate-glass window in the farmhouse I watched in a mixture of wonder and worry as the mighty birds swooped down from the crag in their hundreds, necks bent, claws outstretched, while a tiny figure with a wheelbarrow (Moragrega himself) distributed the carrion (today, rabbit guts from a nearby farm) amid a frenzy of thrashing wings and tearing beaks.

Hitherto undisturbed by mass tourism, urban development, wind farms, or other visual pollution, the Matarraña is a dream destination for walkers. I hiked the trail out of Beceite up El Parrizal, a paradisiacal valley with plantations of walnuts, cherries and almonds, narrowing into a gorge with a fast-flowing river in its depths. Wooden walkways attached precariously to the rock face seemed to hang in the air above pools of a mesmerising turquoise blue. Ahead of me loomed the Ports de Beseit, the forbidding wall of striated grey limestone that crosses the county's eastern flank from north to south, effectively cutting off the Matarraña from the Mediterranean coastal plain that lies beyond.

The region is a beauty contest of charming villages in which every day brings a new competitor. Calaceite has imposing houses with gothic windows and the remains of an ancient Iberian



A computer-generated image of one of the forthcoming properties in the Solo Houses project, designed by Tokyo-based Takei Nabeshima Architects

settlement. (Mas de Flandi, a few miles down the road, makes the region's best olive oil in a high-design mill, well worth a visit.) In lovely La Fresneda, a handful of foreign incomers are giving the village the beginnings of a Deia-style artistic vibe. Number one in the prettiness stakes, however, might be Valderrobres. This diminutive county capital, population 2,338, feels a little like one of those minuscule Tuscan city-states that punched above their weight during the Renaissance before



The village of Valderrobres — Getty Images

sinking back into rural somnolence.

I walked into Valderrobres over a bridge leading to a square with a town hall whose ornate windows and palatial stables bore witness to the Matarraña's agricultural prosperity in the 16th century. At the top of the town stood the castle-palace of the Bishops of Zaragoza, who made the Matarraña their fiefdom, and the 14th-century Gothic church of Santa Maria la Mayor, built like the rest of Valderrobres in golden sandstone, the single nave of whose soaring interior had a simple grandeur befitting what is the de facto cathedral of the county.

Given the region's remoteness, it's a surprise to find that it contains not one

but two first-class hotels, both audacious repurposings of massive masias. One is the Torre del Visco, owned by Englishwoman Jemma Markham and an early pioneer of all-knobs-on-luxe at a time, 25 years ago, when tourism of any sort had yet to arrive in Matarraña. I drove here for dinner one night, unprepared for the 5km of dirt track leading to this 15th-century mansion in a secluded river valley and the excellent cooking of local boy Rubén Catalán's cooking, which is based on the seasonal produce of the farm.

The other is the spectacular "wilderness retreat" Mas de la Serra. Here was another converted masia reached by a long and sometimes hair-raising track – a rustic chateau set in landscape so grand and rugged

you might almost be reminded of Scotland, if it weren't for the fields of almonds in soft baize green unfurling away from the house.

The laird of this estate, and I use the word advisedly, is Alasdair Grant, fifth generation of the distilling family behind Glenfiddich and Balvenie malt whiskies. A former producer of TV travel documentaries, Grant stumbled on the Matarraña in 1998, bought a sprawling abandoned masia a few years later and embarked on a long and painstaking restoration project.

The results are in every way admirable. The masia's nine rooms are furnished in a classy country-house style with local antique furniture, bathrooms in Moroccan tadelakt and windows begging to be flung open on to mind-bending mountain views. There's a billiard room, a small spa, and a rock-floored sitting room hung with oil paintings of Grant's bewhiskered ancestors. The hotel is managed with great aplomb by Peruvians Luis Fabián and his wife Jenny, whose cooking works with local ingredients (almonds, truffles, lamb, peaches) and an occasional touch of spice in homage to her homeland.

On the terrace after dinner I stood with a dram of Mas de la Serra's house malt while Grant told me of his love of the Matarraña's honest-to-goodness ruralism, the absence of coach parties and postcard shops, and the sheer breadth and emptiness of this Big Country. Sightings of the ibex goat Capra pyrenaica, an endangered species with one of its last redoubts in the Ports de Beseit, are a common occurrence on the 28-hectare estate. Guests are sometimes startled on late-summer nights, said Grant, by the sound of wild boars out in the almond fields, crunching their way through the fallen nuts.

We sipped and stared, and listened to the silence. "It's not for everyone," conceded my host, "but certainly for people who want to be right out here in the middle of nature."

Right on cue, on a limestone cliff across from the house, a female ibex could be seen tiptoeing nonchalantly along the precipice with her newborn kid: just a quiet evening walk on the wild side.

DETAILS

Paul Richardson was a guest of Matarraña Turismo (matarranyaturismo.es) and Rusticae (rusticae.es), a booking website whose hotels include Mas de la Serra (doubles from about €160) and Consolación (doubles from about €125). Solo Pezo sleeps five and costs from €450 per night or €3,000 per week; Solo Office sleeps up to eight and costs from €650 per night or €4,000 per week (for both, see Solo-houses.com). The Torre del Visco (torredelvisco.com) has doubles from €195



falling, its 18 villages include three or four of Spain's drop-dead prettiest. Among the Matarraña's delightful eccentricities is its language, an ancient dialect of Catalan locally called *chapurriau*. Despite lying within a few dozen kilometres as the crow flies from the beaches of the Mediterranean, the county's fertile valleys and towering limestone peaks are both wonderfully unspoilt and seriously off-piste – the latter being, of course, a major cause of the former.

I took the N232 south out of Zaragoza, traversing the treeless plains north of Alcañiz, gateway to the Matarraña. For a place with so little available manpower the region keeps itself in very good nick. Stone-walled terraces of olive groves, almonds and vines were perfectly tended. The same couldn't be said for the hulking stone farmhouses characteristic of the region, known as *masias*, or *masos*, many of which have fallen into disrepair and stand dejectedly, magnificent even in decay, awaiting the arrival of someone with deep pockets and a sense of adventure.

At Monroyo I turned off the main road towards Consolación. I first stayed at this remarkable hotel nearly a decade ago, when the idea of contemporary design in a rural context was not the familiar concept it has since become. Barcelona-based Ignacio Mas and Daniel Delgado were the first (and are so far the only) hotelkeepers to bring polished concrete, textured steel and chic Catalan furniture to the distant reaches of southern Aragon. Yet I found, as I sat in my wood-



From main: Solo Pezo, designed by Chilean studio Pezo Von Ellrichshausen, a holiday home sleeping five in the Matarraña; the pool at the Hotel Consolación; the hotel's exterior; a staircase at Solo Pezo; the exterior of Solo Office, which sleeps up to eight

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