

Travel**In Menorca, the first 'private Parador' opens its doors**

Vestige Son Vell is the first in a new collection of historic hotels being created by a Spanish healthcare magnate

Simon Osborne AUGUST 26 2023

In 1928, King Alfonso XIII gave his personal backing to the launch of a hotel with views of the snow-capped Sierra de Gredos, a mountain range west of Madrid. Like Francisco Franco decades after him, Alfonso realised the potential of tourism to boost Spain's fortunes and image. (It was perhaps no coincidence that the new hotel also lay within the king's favourite hunting grounds.)

The rural retreat was a hit and became the first of more than 90 hotels that now make up the state-owned Paradores group, most of which have breathed life into historic buildings. Almost a century later, another notable Spaniard, whose fortune would be the envy of some kings, is creating a private-sector version of something comparable, a chain of historic hotels the Spanish press are calling the "Paradores of the 21st century".

In 2016, Victor Madera, a doctor by trade, oversaw the sale of Quironsalud, the private hospital empire that he had built, to a German company for €5.8bn. Madera received shares worth €400mn in the deal. Even before that windfall, for the last 15 years in fact, Madera and his wife, María Obdulia Fernández, have been quietly acquiring historic properties in need of restoration with a view to building a collection of characterful places to stay.

Son Vell, the first hotel in their Vestige chain, has just opened, in the south-west corner of Menorca, Mallorca's often overlooked little sister, not far from the cobbled city of Ciutadella. In the middle of August, I'm the first journalist to check in.



A poolside lounge in the gardens of Vestige Son Vell © Gabriele Merolli

The 18th-century *casa señorial*, or manor house, is a honey-coloured monument to *marés*, the pale sandstone that has been prised from the ground here for thousands of years. Beneath a pedimented roof and a first-floor loggia, formal gardens draw the eyes towards the Mediterranean, a few hundred yards away.



“There are so many properties in Spain that are in a very bad condition,” María tells me as she shows me around with the elder two of her four daughters, Marta, 25, and Claudia, 23, who also work for Vestige. “If we can buy them we can give them new life. For me, there is something very satisfying about that.”

The family’s portfolio so far runs to 25 historic sites across Spain. They lie in various states of repair and include an abandoned 13th-century castle. So grand are the family’s ambitions, which come with an undisclosed budget, that they have set up their own architectural firm in Madrid, where more than 40 architects and interior designers are reimagining the properties as a mix of hotels and private houses for hire. Further hotels are due to open in the next few years on Mallorca and in Asturias, Extremadura and San Sebastián on the mainland.

The Son Vell estate, which now covers more than 1,000 acres, was bought by Josep Vigo Squella, an aristocratic farmer, in 1762 and his family gradually remodelled the main building in the style of an Italianate mansion. It was a moth-eaten farmhouse for much of the 20th century, until a Madrid-based investment firm bought it in 2006 and later drew up controversial plans to turn it into a 56-room hotel, adding four new buildings.



One of the bedrooms in the main house, featuring original terracotta floor tiles © Gabriele Merolli

Menorca had been spared the tourism development that had reshaped many Spanish coastlines. In 1993, Unesco awarded the island biosphere reserve status. Planning laws prohibit almost all new significant building. Hotel developers must work with what exists, placing an emphasis on conservation and restoration. The previous scheme would have made Son Vell the largest of the *agriturismi*, or restored farmhouse hotels, that dot Menorca. But the plans stalled, and Madera swooped with an unrefusable offer, reassuring local sceptics with a more discreet proposition of 34 rooms.

The family set about a total renovation of the house, which had been occupied only by a caretaker. Above an intimate bar and living spaces, there are now six rooms, rising to a sprawling grand suite, and thick terracotta floor tiles in herringbone formation throughout. Walls are bare stone, white or left to breathe with a lime plaster finish, while bathrooms are modern with sleek marble vanities.

“The context is old and recovered but you can also feel you are in the 21st century,” says María, who oversees the interiors at Vestige and is fond of the stripped-back luxury of the Belgian designer Axel Vervoordt.

My own room is a spacious garden suite in one of the newer buildings, which make up a sort of modernist hamlet among old olive trees, a short stroll from the house past a preserved rotary well. Its yoke would have been tied to a circling donkey. There are restored stable blocks, which house more rooms, and Vermell, the restaurant, where later I'll join María and her daughters for a very fine red mullet.



Diners on the terrace of Sa Clarisa, one of two restaurants at Son Vell © Gabriele Merolli

María, a former teacher, met Madera in their native Asturias while he was still at medical school. After he moved into hospital management and business, they began to collect antique furniture. They found further inspiration in the country homes of England after moving to London to send their daughters to an international school.

After cutting their teeth as custodians of Spanish heritage with the restoration of Palacio de Figueras, a crumbling Asturian pile on the north Spanish coast that is now for hire with Vestige, the family kept hearing about other imperilled properties. “In the UK, you’re all so proud of your cultural heritage and you go and visit a country house two hours away just for the sake of it,” Marta says. “We don’t really have that mentality.”

The revitalised grounds are arguably the star of Son Vell, and the antique pool is among the loveliest I’ve plunged into. Set like a jewel among lawns, date palms and red Cannova roses, it is so perfectly proportioned, with a classical stadium shape, that Vitruvius himself might have been content to recline with an Italicus spritz on one of the plush cabanas scattered about the grass.

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Before breakfast one morning, I borrow a bike and cycle down to Cala de Son Vell, a notch on the Camí de Cavalls, a 115-mile coastal trail that circumnavigates the island. I continue east to Platja de Son Saura, a sparkling beach with white sands and, after a dip, return to enjoy an omelette, cooked just-so with Sobrassada, the revered Balearic spiced sausage.

Son Vell is not the only upmarket agriturismo here. The French Experimental group converted another handsome manor house on the south coast in 2018, while the nearby Torralbenc hotel and winery set the rustic-lux standard in 2013. The opening, in 2021, of a Hauser & Wirth gallery on an island close to the Menorcan capital Mahon further burnished its growing appeal as a destination for the style set — and the antidote to the noisier bits of Ibiza or Mallorca.



A spot to relax in a 'terrace suite' at Son Vell © Gabriele Merolli



Vermell, the hotel's more formal restaurant © Gabriele Merolli

The other guests at Son Vell during my stay are mainly 40-something couples, including a Dutch perfume executive and an English architect, who has checked in for 17 nights with his French-American wife, who runs a high-end vintage fashion site, and their two-year-old son. A Brazilian actor and influencer with 20mn Instagram followers arrives on my final day. A Texan family and a Victoria's Secret model looking for a wedding venue are among dozens of early requests for "buyouts" of the whole hotel.

As tempting as it is to linger by pools or beaches, there is much to explore on Menorca. I take a tour with Marcel Piqueras, a 29-year-old guide and aspiring archaeologist. He drives me towards the more rugged, even less settled north in a rattly old open-top Land Rover. On a high plateau, along an unmarked bumpy dirt track, he shows me the almost 4,000-year-old prehistoric settlement of Son Mercer de Baix, where a stone dwelling shaped like an upturned boat still stands. High above the ravine of Son Fideu, Piqueras whistles in an attempt to raise a response from circling vultures, who are our only company.

The settlement is one of dozens that make up an application for the whole island to be added to Unesco's World Heritage List. They also include T-shaped towers made of rock by the prehistoric Talayotic civilisation. Piqueras says the funding that would follow the award will allow new excavation to take place. "There are towers here that we know were surrounded by houses but nobody has looked for them yet," he says.



A few hundred yards from the hotel is a typical Menorcan white sandy beach

We continue north to Fornells, a charming fishing port and holiday village for Spanish second-home owners. Vestige plans to open another hotel near here next year. Guests will enjoy Sa Llagosta, a restaurant where I watch people go by as chef-patron David de Coca serves me a remarkable kimchi anchovy starter followed by lobster.

The pride Menorcans take in their heritage is evident in more recent structures. Hundreds of 19th-century domed *barracas*, or stone storm shelters for livestock, are scattered among the fields. Vestige failed to get planning permission to turn one close to the swimming pool into a spa treatment room. (A spa complex is due to open in nearby farm buildings in two years).

I am most captivated by the farm and garden gates found throughout Menorca. Hewn from the gnarled, wind-bent timbers of wild olive trees, they are further shaped by artisans known as *araders*. The gates' rustic elegance feels very Menorcan. "People know how to protect this island, and it's very authentic to me," María tells me as we sit down for dinner beside the old well.

It's that kind of dedication, within and beyond the drystone walls of Son Vell, that elevates the place more than any small fortune could alone. Not that María has been able to relax and enjoy it herself. "Maybe I can do that next year," she says, as she gazes across the lawns. By then, as the family's new empire grows, she may have competition of her own.

Details

Simon Usborne was a guest of Vestige Son Vell ([vestigecollection.com](https://www.vestigecollection.com)). Double room rates in September start from €603 per night including breakfast, or from €337 per night in October

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