



Belgian chic on the Isla Bonita

By Liz Gill

Published: January 23 2004 16:34 | Last Updated: January 23 2004 16:34

In the days when they were lovers as well as movie stars, Ursula Andress and Jean-Paul Belmondo had a house built on the dramatic cliffs of Es Cubells in south-west Ibiza. Sadly in those days structural engineering on the island was not what it should have been and gradually the building began to subside, ending up, like the relationship itself, on the rocks.

Today an extraordinary new house is taking shape there, built over four levels on a 6,500 sq m piece of land. When finished it will have 1,200 sq m of living space with a gymnasium, garage, two swimming pools, two terraces with gardens, an internal lift, staff quarters and four separate guest houses where visitors will be able to lie in bed and gaze through floor-to-ceiling glass straight out to sea.

Built for a French couple, it has taken three years to construct and involved cutting into the mountainside; the last stage will be to put excavated earth back on the roof to reintegrate the house into its surroundings. When finished it will be worth about €3m (£5.6m).

The house is the latest venture by Bruno Erpicum, a Belgian architect whose name has become synonymous with contemporary design on the island.

So distinctive are his stark clean lines, precision-sharp edges and use of steel and glass that his houses are immediately identifiable even from the air.

They make a striking contrast to most Spanish developments even those in nearby Mallorca where holiday or second homes usually take the form of traditional villas with their curved arches, white plastered walls and terracotta tiled roofs.

Erpicum's approach can also be seen as the latest manifestation of the island's connection with the Modern Movement which began in the 1930s when its cheapness and sense of safety drew a number of artists fleeing the turmoil on the Continent. Among them were architects Josep Lluís Sert and Edwin Brouer - both men's work is now protected by preservation orders - who were particularly inspired by the square simplicity of the old *casas pagesas* or peasant houses. Despite its proximity to Mallorca around 60 miles to the north-east, Ibiza has a distinctly different flavour both in climate - it is usually three degrees warmer than its neighbour - and appearance.

The old houses, where a family started off with one flat-roofed white cube and added more cubes as they expanded or prospered, feel more north African than Spanish.

Today, away from the odd sun, sea and sex package-holiday spot like San Antonio, Ibiza is a playground for the wealthy and stylish from all over Europe. A world heritage site since 1999, it regularly draws the likes of John Galliano, Jean Paul Gaultier, Naomi Campbell and Elle

McPherson. It also has a substantial gay community whose taste is often at the cutting edge of design and who have disposable income to match. So successful has the island become that it now has a population of over 94,000, and, says Erpicum, people now want houses they can enjoy all year round.

"I think I was probably the first person here to put in double glazing and underfloor heating," he says, "so that clients could come in winter too. That's only really happened in the past ten years or so with the cheap flights."

Erpicum, now 44, built his first house on the island for a Belgian couple in 1988 - "I think they chose me because I was young and cheap" - and since then has designed a further 13, training local builders, used to creating a much more rough-and-ready finish, to meet the exacting technological standards his properties require. When there are no window frames, for instance, and the glass runs flush to the concrete wall there is no room for imprecision.

Although he has worked in America and South Africa he says the Ibiza climate is the most difficult he has had to deal with: humidity can reach 100 per cent in summer and in the past buildings often did not last more than ten years. Clients who are spending millions of euros, naturally now demand durability.

It is rare for an Erpicum house to come on the open market. However one in Sta Eulalia is currently for sale with a guide price of around €2m. Perched on the side of a hill on a 15,000 sq m plot, it has 440 sq m of living space bearing most of the hallmarks of his style. Three of the four walls in the 18m living room are glass and are overhung by a canopy that runs 26m without a column and at a height calculated to let in the lower winter sun but shade the house at the height of summer.

It has two pools - one decorative, one for swimming - and an internal courtyard with aubergine coloured walls, white silicate chips for ground cover and three orange trees. "There's a lot of activity in Ibiza, so there's a time to dance and listen to music and talk, but then there's a time to rest and think and contemplate. A lot of places don't have a space to dream in."

The interior is similarly minimalist with floor-to-ceiling handleless cupboards concealing appliances and storage space. The floor is slate as is the terrace outside: he believes it is important for exterior and interior to be a continuum. Erpicum, who did the interior of the Dalí museum on London's South Bank, has also designed the furniture in the house and is planning a sculpture for the enclosed garden at the rear.

Like the untreated steel fronts on the bathroom cupboards, the sculpture is intended to rust, even decay. "It will last maybe only ten years. I don't mind if some things don't last for ever. Neither do you and I."

Land on Ibiza is given a ranking that determines how big a plot someone must have in order to build on it. These range from 1,000 sq m in an *urbano* area to more than 50,000 sq m in a *rustico*. In designated areas of outstanding natural beauty the figure may be as much as 200,000 sq m. There are also restrictions on proximity to the sea and the top of hills.

The planning authorities have generally been supportive of Erpicum's work, though on occasion they have insisted on some tempering of the original design. "Maybe something's been too strong or too high and they've asked me to modify it," he says. "Sometimes people have complained while a house is being constructed saying it's ugly and must be stopped but once it's finished and they see how it fits into the surroundings they like it."

Men, he says, tend to love the style straightaway - "they're less attached to the past" - but he now has women converts and some of his properties are owned by families with small children. "It's a myth

that you have to be super tidy to live in a very modern place."

One of his next projects will be to build two properties on adjoining plots, also on the cliffs at Es Cubells, for London businessman and property developer David Brown. One will be around 450 sq m with five bedrooms, the other 350 sq m with four.

Brown, who plans to keep the larger for his own use and sell the other, says, "The position is stunning - near the top of the mountain with a 180° view - and I wanted an architect who could make the most of that. I wanted minimalist contemporary with as much glass as possible so you can see the sea and the stars. I've been coming to the island since the mid 1980s. I've always loved the clubs and the music here but the island is very spiritual place as well."

FACTFILE

- For more information contact Kuhn and Partner, tel + 971 19 20 30; www.kuhn-partner.com
- Bruno Erpicum, tel. + 322 687 27 17; www.erpicum.org

Related stories

[Home is where the heat is](#) Jan 23 2004 16:34

[Not exactly la bella figura](#) Jan 23 2004 16:34

[Where the sun never sets:](#) Jan 23 2004 16:34

[A laid-back taste of England in the sun](#) Jan 23 2004 16:34

[Short supply and high demand](#) Jan 23 2004 16:34

[A frosty ride out in the country](#) Jan 23 2004 16:34

[And the rich shall live with the rich](#) Jan 23 2004 16:34

[Low-cost but the hassle is high](#) Jan 23 2004 16:34

[You can trust me. I built the place](#) Jan 23 2004 16:35

🔒 = requires [subscription](#) to FT.com

Find this article at:

<http://news.ft.com/s01/servlet/ContentServer?>

[pagename=FT.com/StoryFT/FullStory&c=StoryFT&cid=1073281204310&p=1016625900941](http://news.ft.com/s01/servlet/ContentServer?pagename=FT.com/StoryFT/FullStory&c=StoryFT&cid=1073281204310&p=1016625900941)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

