

Ahead in the clouds...

Words and pictures by Sarah Monaghan

Taking on the renovation of a medieval masía in the heart of Catalonia has been an epic project for writer Matthew Parris. The result is spectacular however and here he shows us round his own castle in Spain

In the passport queue in front of me at Girona Airport, a gaggle of plump German women, bottle-bleached hair, deep gold tans and big heels, are in high spirits. They rummage in white handbags for ID and giggle as lipsticks and Puiz Buin bottles get scattered across the floor. They've clearly just arrived raring to hit the Costa Brava bars and beaches.

I leave them to climb aboard one of the fleet of courtesy hotel coaches waiting outside. I'm heading into the heart of Catalonia to a region in complete contrast to the package-holiday

Above and right

Matthew Parris on the veranda of L'Avenc. The house is built from a hard sandstone called gris which comes from across the Pyrenees in France; the morning view from the house: cloudscape over the Montseny mountains

resorts of Tossa de Mar, Lloret and Roses which have been big such tourist pulls for the Germans and we Brits ever since the 1960s.

I'm going north-west into the mountainous interior, in the direction of the country town of Vic and L'Avenc, the home of the former MP Matthew Parris. The drive is a dramatic affair with the weather in theatrical mood. In an hour it puts on a display of brilliant sunshine, torrential rain, lightning, thunder, hail and more dazzling sunshine. Evergreen forests flash past between the columns of long viaducts suspended between deep valleys. Every few kilometres, as I emerge from heavyweight tunnels hewn through the mountains, I catch a glimpse of the Pyrenees glowering.

The route leads through the Montseny mountain range into the Collsacabra (literally

Mountain Pass of the Goats). At the small village of Tavertet, I hit a dead end. Matthew's warned me of this: "The road will look like it goes nowhere but turn left and a track will appear". It does, at a terrifying angle – up. It follows the cliff edge and is an ascent into and out of the clouds – to the left, cows are grazing coarse grass and wild thyme; to the right, a thousand metres of sheer cliff falls away. Through the rain clouds sitting stolidly in the valley below, blurred silhouettes of the Pyrenees point to a silver strip – the Med, where, by now, no doubt, the German Fräulein are in hotel rooms unpacking capacious swimsuits.

As the track curves, the hulking shape of L'Avenc veers into dramatic view. From the first glimpse, I can see precisely why this magnificent house captured Matthew's imagination. It sits, isolated, in its own spectacular domain, on a

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rocky plateau just 200 metres from the cliff edge. It couldn't be better protected from its enemies – they must have been seen from miles away. Sure enough, as I drive up, Matthew is waiting: “I saw you coming,” he says.

Matthew first came across the fortified masía 20 years ago as he was hiking along the GR2 – one of the Grandes Rutas, great national hiking paths, that criss-cross Spain. Deserted and succumbing to the ravages of neglect, the three-storey house had a coat of arms and a date, 1559, chiselled into its façade. It had been uninhabited since the 1950s. Matthew remembers the day he first prised open the vast solid oak front doors. Designed to be large enough to allow men with their horses to ride straight in, they are framed by a magnificent stone arch and gave a hint of the grandeur to come. “We expected dereliction of course, and we found it,” he says. “The wooden floors had half rotted away but as we clambered up the remains of a staircase, we realised that this was no farmhouse at all. It was a stately home – a small chateau.”

Born in Africa in 1949, Matthew grew up in Cyprus, Rhodesia, Jamaica and Britain as he and his five younger brothers and sisters moved from country to country with their father Leslie's cable-laying business. The final posting was Catalonia where Leslie arrived in the 1970s to run a factory. He and his wife Theresa liked the area so much that they settled, eventually retiring there, and sent their youngest children to the local schools. Three of them, Belinda, Deborah and Mark have now all married Catalans. Being the oldest, Matthew missed out on the Catalan schooling (he was already at Oxford by this time) but it's clear that he's formed a deep bond with this corner of Spain. Matthew went on to work for Margaret Thatcher before becoming an MP in 1979. He left to present LWT's *Weekend World* and to become the parliamentary writer for *The Times*.

When, in 1997, the owner of L'Avenc put it on the market, Matthew didn't hesitate. He joined forces with his sister Belinda and her builder



husband Joaquim, and his brother Francesc, and bought the place. They paid £160,000. From the start, Matthew admits, they had no idea what they would do with the pile. His father warned it would be “un pozo sin fondo” (a bottomless pit) but, Matthew was resolute: “All my life I've been biting off more than I can chew and it's what has pushed me onto projects I hardly thought myself capable of,” he says. Mind you, after signing for the deeds, he went back, he says, to take a long hard look at the place “with the eyes of a cash-strapped owner rather than a star struck rambler” and realised that: “It was a shambles”.

It was. The whole roof needed to be replaced. Says Matthew: “It was a good deal bigger than the roof of an English town church.” Add to the to-

replace list collapsed floors, doors and windows hanging from rotten frames, crumbling outhouses, and you get the scale of the job to be done. Oh and there was no plumbing or electrical power...

But the Parris family, it's obvious, have nothing if not vast quantities of self-resource and determination. Take Matthew's mother, Theresa, now 79 – she still teaches yoga three times a week to residents of an old people's home in her local Catalan village. Over the past seven years they have steadily transformed the wreck into the noble property it once was. In the course of it, they've learned more about the great house's history and fallen more under its spell. The oldest part dates back to the 13th Century and under the cellar remains of a Roman road have been found. Part of the house

is clearly Gothic and has the dramatic stone-carved windows and arches to prove it. The crumbling collection of outhouses has been transformed into pretty cottages. Electricity is now supplied via solar panels above the house. A car park has been excavated into the hillside so that it is hidden from view. A swimming pool is under construction. They've all been involved; sister Belinda has acted as clerk of works; sister Deborah as housekeeper, brother-in-law Joaquim as ideas man and project manager.

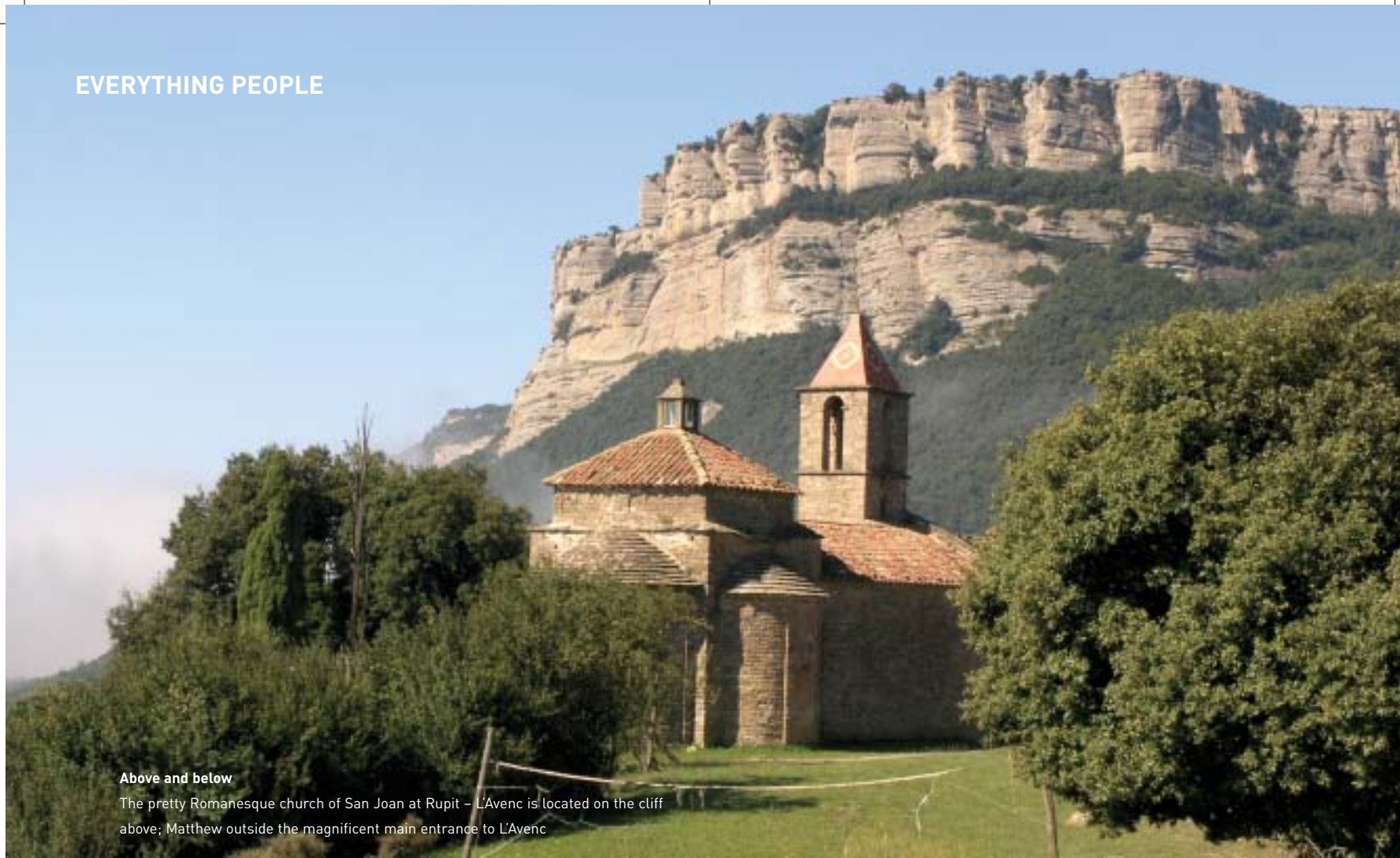
On the veranda of L'Avenc, the ring of a mobile is breaking the silence. Matthew is fielding calls. A BBC producer is phoning to book him on *Question Time*; a journalist wants his views on Ken Clarke's pretensions to the Tory throne; his publicist at Penguin needs to arrange a



Right and left

Matthew aboard the bulldozer currently employed in excavating the new swimming pool; L'Avenc with the new holiday cottages to the rear; original stone carvings in the Gran Sala (State Room) seem to represent monks – during the 13th Century the house was the home of the Bishop of Vic Galceran Cacosta and his brother Guillem, a knight of the King of Aragón

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**Above and below**

The pretty Romanesque church of San Joan at Rupit - L'Avenc is located on the cliff above; Matthew outside the magnificent main entrance to L'Avenc

book launch date... London, with its crowded streets, is a world away. "Puce faces, bold headlines, ridicule and anger, grey streets and grey skies ... these occupied another universe from the blues and browns and soft greens of the Collsacabra ... Perhaps that is why the house seemed to draw me," says Matthew. This year, he has escaped to his Catalan bolt-hole over 20 times: "I come for a few days at a time and buy Ryanair flights from Stansted to Girona ahead when they're cheap."

He is keen to promote the other side of Catalonia that few people see: "I might be spitting in the wind," he says, "but if people ventured away from the Costa Brava beaches, they would be amazed at what they would find." Surprisingly few tourists do go more than a few kilometres inland but if they did, they would discover stunning mountain scenery, natural parks and valleys dotted with Romanesque churches. Rural Catalonia, he says, is a secret waiting to be discovered.

So what now? The truth is that the Parris family is not really sure and while finishing touches to the interior take place, they are thinking it through. The cottages are likely to be rented out to walkers while L'Avenc itself, with its reception rooms and grand entrance hall, would make a superb venue for conferences or functions. They are sure though that whatever purpose the property finally takes, they want it to allow them to continue to live there... Says Matthew: "For me simply staying here was always my dream."

For enquiries about renting the cottages at L'Avenc, email: info@avenc.com



A Castle in Spain by Matthew Parris is published by Penguin on October 6th, £17.99

