



# A GRACIOUS CHRONICLE

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A 19-YEAR ODYSSEY TO PAINSTAKINGLY  
RECOVER IBIZA'S ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE  
IS BEHIND THE WALLS OF THIS TRADITIONAL  
IBICENCO FINCA

Future generations of historians, architects and designers will owe a great debt to Alex and Françoise Agad. Together, the Swiss-born couple have faithfully and authentically restored a centuries-old farmhouse in the hills of Santa Agnès on the island's west coast. The house and surrounding landscape are a masterpiece of historical architecture and design and – under the meticulous eyes of the Agads – are an achievement worthy of recognition.

Alex's family had been coming to Ibiza for decades – his parents owned a holiday home in Es Cubells that remains in the family today. His interest in the architectural history of Ibiza started around 20 years ago, when he picked up a copy of Belgian architect Philippe Rotthier's classic book *Ibiza, Le Palais Paysan* – one of the definitive accounts of traditional Ibicenco design. Rotthier studied the architecture of Ibiza through the lens of an anthropologist, connecting construction and design techniques to the mythology of the people.

That book and the studies of famed architect Rolph Blakstad became the trigger for Alex and Françoise's two-year search for a pristine farmhouse. "We looked at a lot of houses," says Alex. "But each time something was not right. Either it had been partially renovated or badly repaired. There was always something that made it not 100-percent typical." Finally, they came across Es Racó de Dalt, an original farmhouse in Santa Agnès that had been in the same family for 200 years, but is likely much older. "It was untouched. It had perfect proportions," says Alex. "There was still no electricity, mains water or glass in the windows. That's how people lived in those times." It was exactly the challenge the couple had been seeking.

The sale was completed in 1999 and Alex and Françoise embarked on a 19-year journey to create, or more accurately, re-create a lifestyle long lost to progress. Traditional Ibicenco architecture has long been recognised as unique – interesting enough for the architectural greats of the 20th century to visit the island to see for themselves.

Le Corbusier, Germán Rodríguez Arias, Josep Lluís Sert and Erwin Broner (whose Bauhaus home in Dalt Vila is now a museum) have all passed through to study the distinctive features of the *casa payesa*.

Isolation and scarcity informed much of traditional Ibicenco life. It's a cultural ethos that finds a beautiful metaphor in its architecture. Homes were built on the basis of necessity, often starting as one-room stone dwellings. The oldest room at Es Racó de Dalt was built directly onto the rock bed, the flagstone left natural and misshapen. It's likely the *porxo* came next. This rectangular room is a consistent feature in an architectural tradition where no two houses are the same. It is the main entrance, workroom, living room and also used for any other purpose that might be required for farming life. From this primary structure, the house would expand according to the needs of the family, one cubic room at a time.

The handprint of some long-lost relative is evident in the enormous Sabina wood beams supporting the ceilings. Their girth is impressive, the wood having been harvested back when the island was covered in old-growth trees. The clefts in their surfaces have the uneven texture of a hand-wielded hatchet, not the smooth planes of a machine or saw. Time was spent preparing these supports, slowly, by hand, under the same sun that warms our skins today.

Keeping everything in its original form means consistently applying the same materials that were in common use back then. The ceilings of Es Racó de Dalt are stuffed with dried Posidonia seaweed collected from the coastlines and used as a natural insulation. Above that is a layer of ash, followed by a layer of clay used as waterproofing, all of which needed to be replaced every five years. One of the few modern concessions Alex has made was to eventually put a thin layer of cement on the flat rooftops. "In the end, it was very complicated to continue in the old way," he reluctantly admits. "There were little leaks all the time."





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The Agads have kept furnishing simple, as would have been the custom. Ostentatious display was not a common characteristic of the local culture and farming families had few belongings to begin with. Alex collects antique trousseau chests of which there are some beautiful examples at Es Racó de Dalt. The beds are rare finds from Ibiza and Menorca. The dark wooden headboards are decorated with religious paintings. Their scarcity, Alex believes, comes from an old tradition he was told about that called for the beds of the dead to be burned.

Within the cobblestone courtyard is a structure that was once a stable – now transformed into a charming self-contained two-bedroom apartment. A beautifully conserved olive press sits in the corner of the small living room. Outside, a marble trough filled with water sits against a stone wall and is one of the oldest features of the house. It was used to water the animals but closer inspection reveals it once had an entirely different purpose. It is an ancient Roman coffin – nobody knows how it ended up as a water fountain but one can only imagine the series of conversations that needed to take place for it to be utilised in such a way. Especially considering the strong superstitions held by previous generations.

Mythology proclaims that bad spirits enter from the north and as such, any north-facing window needs protection in the form of a white cross. It's called the *Cruz de Bruja* – the Witch's Cross – and can still be seen occasionally on some old houses. From the name, one would assume it was to keep witches and evil spirits away, but further investigation reveals Ibiza's witches were good and more likely the crosses were painted and blessed by older women within the community, whose expertise in herbal remedies granted them an exalted position. Unsurprisingly, Alex has maintained this feature at Es Racó de Dalt.

It took Alex 15 years to decide on putting in a pool. "I didn't want to put the swimming pool near the house," he explains. "It would have taken away any authenticity." When the couple's children came along, the need for a pool became more obvious. The pool is masterfully concealed within the gardens and from its deck you can see the top of the monolith of Es Vedrà in the distance. There's a path just beyond that goes through the scrub to the tiny cove of Corral d'en Guillem. "We are the last house before the sea," says Alex. "The bay is so small. Even in August we have it to ourselves."

Three Phoenician coins and shards of Arabic pottery have been discovered on the property, leading Alex and others to surmise that there has been a dwelling here for much longer than previously thought. A few years ago, a gardener was digging to plant new trees when he struck a ceramic pot. It was filled with pesetas dated from the 1930s. Monetarily, the discovery held little value but became an intriguing dinner party conversation. Someone buried his or her life savings here during the Civil War and it had been forgotten. What on earth had happened?

Es Racó de Dalt is a remarkable accomplishment. It takes a certain doggedness to create a home so faithful to the original. "I think the most important thing is not to be in a hurry," concludes Alex. "If you remove something, you can never get it back so you have to be very careful. I am proud it took us so many years to achieve this result. I don't regret anything." The layers of life evident in this outstanding and noteworthy home have definitely been further enriched by the Agads' heartfelt love for Ibiza. This passion for authenticity is Ibiza's gain. Es Racó de Dalt will not only be the legacy of the Agads, but also a point of pride for all Ibicencos.