

The further you go from the madding crowd, the richer the experience – something known to all Mallorca-philes. Turn inland off the Ma-1 motorway towards Es Capdellà, and a single-track road brings you into a silent valley ringed by the crags of the Sierra Tramuntana. An avenue of palms leads the eye to a lush garden, beyond which stands a handsome house in the warm-coloured limestone typical of the island's historic buildings.

In a place that is already home to more than 25 five-star hotels and many others that describe themselves as

"rural deluxe", you might question the need for one more exclusive country-house retreat. However, a night at Castell Son Claret (pictured below), in the west of the island, should put that thought to rest. No expense has been spared converting the property into a 38-room hotel (opening this month); a labour of love for its owner, German billionaire Klaus-Michael Kühne.

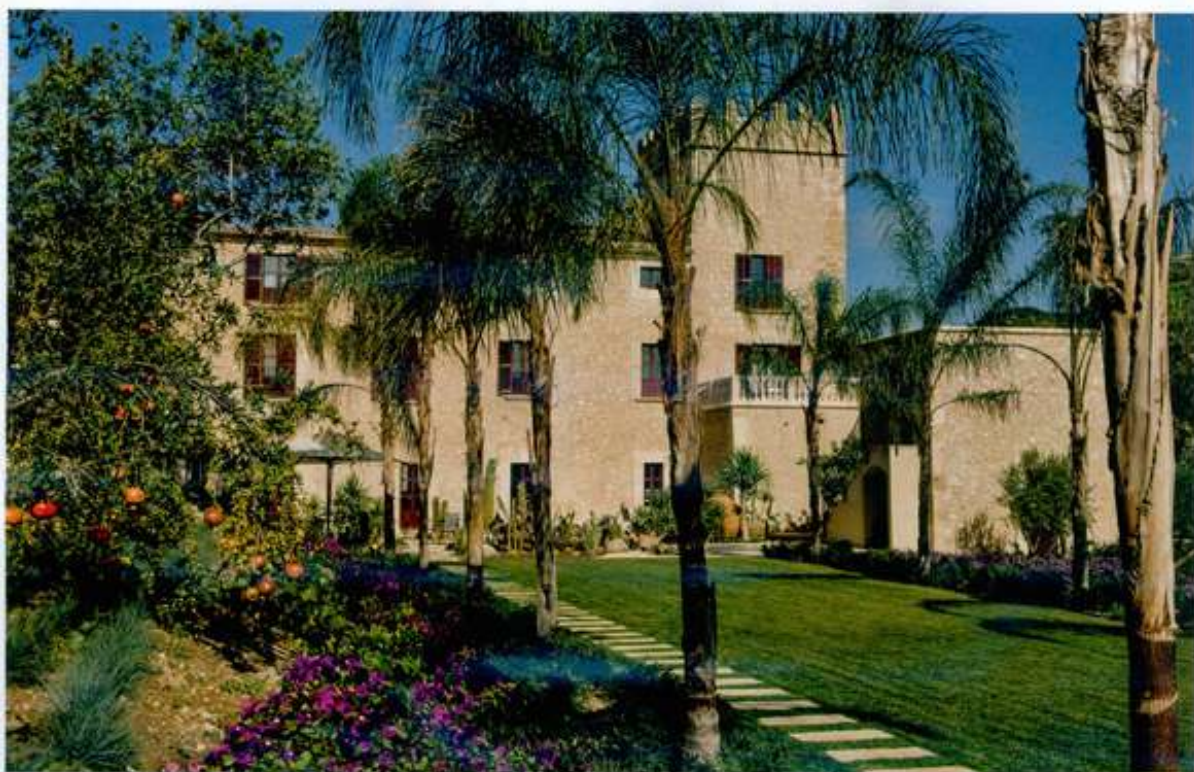
There's certainly an awful lot to love. Where even Mallorca's grandest estates seldom exceed a few dozen hectares, Son Claret's 132ha constitute a *posseïsió* (the local term for country seat) on an extravagant scale. The sprawling property takes in mountains, forests and farmland, as well as the house itself, a *mallorquin*

A MELLOW BALEARIC BEAT

Into Mallorca's plethora of five-star hotels comes a new venture that's raising the hospitality stakes on the island. Paul Richardson falls for the unexpected tranquillity – and supreme refinement – of this historic ruin turned deluxe retreat

Castell Son Claret,
near Es Capdellà in
western Mallorca





Left: Castell Son Claret's terrace and event lawn.
Below: the Panorama pool

mansion dating from the mid-19th century that, if not actually a castle, has enough of both the four-square solidity of a defensive building and the grand dimensions of a noble seat to justify the sobriquet.

The phenomenon of well-to-do Germans buying up houses on this island is nothing new: the expat German community is 22,000-strong and, according to one estimate, as much as a third of Mallorca's real estate is in German hands. But the Castell Son Claret – bought in 2010 by Kühne with a business partner whom he later bought out – is in another league. For 40 years the Castell's crenellated twin towers had lain in a state of near-ruin, its noble rooms reduced to housing both sheep and their shepherds.

Its new proprietor has no previous experience in luxury hotels, beyond having stayed in a great many of them. At 75, the Swiss-based Kühne is honorary chairman and a majority shareholder of Kühne + Nagel, one of the world's biggest logistics companies, founded by his grandfather, August Kühne, in 1890. (According to *Forbes* magazine, his net worth, as of March, is \$9bn.) He already had strong connections with the Balearic isle, making between six and eight visits a year to his stupendous villa above the port in Andratx.

So the old place could not have fallen into better hands; and the timing of the project is not as bad as it might at first seem. Mallorca has been in part protected from the problems besetting the Spanish economy, thanks largely to the buoyancy of its top-end tourist industry. Demand is still high for small-scale luxury properties, though none of the more recent big tourist investments on the island contains a drop of public money. Puerto Adriano, the new Philippe Starck-designed marina – a 20-minute drive from the Castell – for example, was funded privately to the tune of €90m.

Kühne's plans for the Castell were ambitious in scope, but subtle in execution. For the first year of its new life the house served as a conference venue for the K+N empire, with business meetings in the former olive press and dinners served in the chapel. As the Castell slowly evolved, Kühne's idea was to retain that sense of exclusivity. This was to be a grand hotel that would never entirely feel like one. From his own experience, he

A manicured jogging track of four and a half miles that never meanders beyond the property's borders gives an idea of the estate's enormous size



understood that nothing impresses more than calm and discretion – hence the hotel's less-is-more philosophy, summed up in its catch-line, "The luxury of silence".

The farm continues to be worked by locals, while a kitchen garden provides fruit and vegetables for its restaurant. The gardens have been landscaped by designer Tatjana von Griesheim, while the interiors (surprisingly) are the work of Kühne himself, together with his wife Christine. The Castell's 38 rooms (of which 15 are suites) are generously layered in marble, sandstone, leather and noble woods, for a clean-lined aesthetic that errs on just the right side of sobriety. The solid oak doors, beautifully made and fitted, create a deep hush throughout the building. Two suites in the converted stables each have their own 5m pool – par for the course in Asia, but a generous layout here. There is also the scenic Panorama pool (pictured above), with its views of the mountains. A manicured jogging track of four and a half miles that never meanders beyond the borders of the property gives an idea of the possession's enormous size.

The cuisine is likely to prove a major draw: the Castell has persuaded Fernando Pérez-Arellano, chef at Zaranda at the Hilton Sa Torre – and certainly the most talented chef working on the island today – to bring his whole

operation, lock stock and barrel, to Son Claret, including the name, most of its personnel, and (quite remarkably) its Michelin star.

None of which is to say that the rebirth has been without difficulties. Plans for a golf course, to add to the five already in the municipality of Calvià, were thrown out after protests by ecologists and residents of nearby Es Capdellà. When the permits came through for Son Claret's conversion into a hotel, the requirements were strict: the paints used were to be whitewash-based, the floors were to major on island stone. But the results have more than justified any hassle. The Swiss-based Unique Hotel Management is running the Castell, which has been granted membership to The Leading Hotels of the World even before its doors have opened.

Meanwhile, on a warm spring afternoon, its Moorish terraced garden is as quiet as a cloister. Staff clutching iPads glide through the corridors. A short distance away fountains splash, a kitchen worker picks oranges for the next morning's breakfast juice. For those who value such quietude as the height of luxury, Kühne's Castell will have earned its stars already. ➔

Castell Son Claret, Carretera Es Capdellà-Galilea, km 1.7 07196 Es Capdellà, Calvià (+34971-138 629; www.castellsonclaret.com); from €295, deluxe pool suites from €1,545.