

Top 10 Features of a low maintenance home

Written by Mark Paddon

When it comes to choosing a house for purchase, or carrying out works to an existing property, materials, design and build methods can make the difference between an easy life with low maintenance requirements, or a future of endless tasks to keep the owner reluctantly busy every weekend.

The truth is, many people come to Spain in search of a more relaxed life, and while some people love a DIY challenge, many would prefer more leisurely pursuits. Buyers get more for their money in Spain and 'more' property with 'more' features means MORE MAINTENANCE. Though very few houses will have a complete set of low maintenance characteristics, there are a number of points buyers can look out for when purchasing or specifying new works, to ensure that their future includes more spare cash and more time to spend it.

Top 10 features to look out for (or specify in new works / renovations):-

GOOD ROOF OVERHANG

A decent roof overhang (30cm +), on all elevations will cut down maintenance requirements on outer walls. Not only will finishes such as paint or coloured render last longer, they will also be protected from dirty rain (which is common in Spain especially when weather fronts are driven up from North Africa). Window and door openings are also more protected, damp ingress is far less likely and any timber doors or windows will last much longer. The higher the outer walls, the larger the overhang should be e.g. 30cm+ for single storey, adding 10cm + for every storey thereafter such that a 2 storey building should have at least 40cm of overhang and 4 storeys 60cm + (Some poor designs actually have the lesser overhang at the higher level). Larger overhangs are more expensive, such that many roofs are under designed (especially at gable ends). As the roof is one of the most important features of any building it is well worth making overhang a priority on any new works or choosing a house that has this valuable feature.

MINIMAL FLAT ROOFING

Many properties have some flat roofed areas, but for low maintenance, pitched roofs are preferred. As a general rule, flat roofs do, do or will leak. Characteristics liable to permit water ingress, such as parapet walls, blocked drainage points, susceptibility to thermal/traffic related movement and waterproof membrane decay, mean that most flat roofs are an ongoing

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headache for owners, until the day they decide to add a new pitched roof over the top. Many Spanish homes include upper terraces or 'solariums' and as a low maintenance rule, it is better for upper terraced areas to be located over open nayas, such that any minor water ingress following or during heavy rain, won't affect the main living areas of the house. Where possible opt for lighter coloured tiles for any upper terraces as they will be less affected by the heat. All such tiles should be grouted with a special flexible waterproof grout designed specifically for this purpose. Graveling over non-trafficked flat roof surfaces can also protect them from thermal extremes, though any pooling areas won't dry out as rapidly.

Long-term water ingress can cause structural failure in both timber, reinforced concrete and steel beams. It should be noted that there is a current trend for flat roofed minimalist designs, make sure you check any newbuild specifications to ensure that any flat roofs are well designed to avoid future problems.

STONE FACING

All wall surfaces whether internal or external, main house or garden walls, will be relatively maintenance free if clad or built in stone. While stone is now expensive, in the long term, this natural material will save the owner considerable redecoration costs and allow lower walls to breath, and resist splash back staining (which is why it is typically included at low level on many properties). Fake stone and ceramic tiles do not always have the same breathable properties and those that don't breath should be avoided. A typical villa will cost over €3000 to redecorate externally and this requirement may occur every 5 years or so (much less if roof overhang is poor). Choosing a stone faced house or paying the extra in the first place will save thousands over the years, it also won't flake, is less likely to show hairline cracking or look dirty (any localised staining can be power washed off). It is not unheard of for new home owners to have to repaint within just a couple of years, if your builder can give you stone as an option it should be seriously considered. If not, as a bare minimum, make sure that lower walls are clad to include an angled top edge cement fillet over which the paint finish should extend. Pointing should be flush with the stone surface (typical in Spain) or ideally weather pointed (common in UK but not Spain), while proud pointing that extends beyond the stone face should be avoided. Remember, in the long-term stone works out to be cheaper than painted render.

TEXTURED OR 'MONOCAP' COLOURED RENDER

Textured surfaces provide a much better key for paint finishes, ideally ensure that any

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sand/cement render finish is brushed after application and before drying (there is a special metal comb for this) to create a good key, otherwise dashed finishes also work very well and prevent paint key loss, which is very common over smooth renders. Modern 'monocap' renders are normally waterproof (but breath) and incorporate colour pigment, such that painting is not needed. In the long term they may get stained (especially if roof over hang and sill detailing is poor), and any key loss may make patching-in difficult to hide, such that painting over may eventually be required, so they are not 'maintenance free', but they can realistically give 10 years of good performance if applied correctly and combined with good detailing. Again opt for a textured finish, such that any future paint will have a decent key.

MINIMAL SUB GROUND LIVING SPACE

No matter how good a sub ground damp proofing system may be, if you have the option, go for a house that has all living space located above external ground level. Not only does this eliminate the risk of retained soil related damp penetration, but also reduces the risk of flash flooding. Penetrating damp at basement level will also cause problems of condensation in upper living areas. Most underbuilds are not designed for use as living space and may well not include proper horizontal and vertical damp proof membranes. Garages that include drives sloping down to the door rather than away should also be avoided. Sump pumps tend to fail in thunderstorms (due to power cuts) and gulleys get blocked, so if you've got the choice of a property that's 'high and dry', it will generally be the preferred low maintenance option.

LESS TIMBER WINDOWS

Timber windows are often the most attractive option especially in more rustic style properties, nowadays however, timber look aluminium and UPVC is visually almost indistinguishable from the real thing. The re-treating of exposed timber window areas e.g. sills and lower casements will be a regular (bi annual) requirement. While in the very long term UPVC and Aluminium may prove to have some problems of their own (e.g. if coloration breaks down), they won't rot and are definitely the best current option. Some older properties do however deserve to be kept in their original form and indeed for some older buildings, anything other than timber may not be permitted. If real timber is chosen, hardwoods are generally more robust, and all timbers should ideally be pressure impregnated rather than just surface treated.

Doors.

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Unfortunately it's not so easy to fake a door, unless glazed (frame and casement only is wood effect), the larger panels tend to look less realistic and it has to be said that a front door is such an important aesthetic feature of any house, it's well worth installing an attractive timber one. For low maintenance, inclusion of a portico (or at least tiled canopy) will protect the door from the worst of the weather. For town houses inset doors (creating a porch with outer security bars) are the best option. Ideally exposed doors will be set above external entrance level and include a weathering strip at the base, which encourages water to drip onto the lower external porch floor area, (such floors should be laid to a good fall away from the door). Rustic older properties may include brass cover panels to the lower third to reduce weathering, full timber doors should be retreated regularly (good initial treatment of upper and lower edges is essential, (shaded porch protection will also stop the adverse effects of too much sun). A good locking system and security hinges can help to make a thick timber door relatively secure, but additional security bars (e.g. to outer porch) are recommended.

Wherever possible external windows and doors should be set at least half way into the opening. Flush external fitting (one of the biggest mistakes made in 70's UK house design) will not only look boxy and less substantial, but it will make the frame and casement more exposed to the elements.

Internally timber doors are fine, though they must be properly treated against insect attack including frames and architraves.

THE RIGHT TYPE OF TILE JOINTS

Floor tiles are the norm in Spain and make sense in this dusty and hot climate. As well as acting as a heat sink (for summer cooling), they will stand up to years of mopping (which the Spanish seem to prefer over the vac). While most internal ceramic tiles will be quite hard wearing, lack of damp proof membrane on lower floors can result in salt staining and general degradation, so ideally all tiles in contact with the ground will be tiled over a floor which includes a damp proof membrane or tanking system.

The right joints between tiles are key to minimising maintenance. The best options are to go for minimal joint e.g. less than 2mm or choose a very dark jointing grout, e.g. very dark grey or even black. While lighter greys and sand colours will look fantastic when new, on larger visible

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joints e.g. 7mm, the joints will mark in trafficked areas and eventually become unsightly, whereas un trafficked areas will remain clean. Go for black in the first place and your floor will come up pristine every time it's mopped.

The same principle can be used for wall tiles, though black may be undesirable. Fortunately most vertical discolouring is due to water sediments e.g. in showers. Choose a beige or earth coloured jointing grout to avoid this. White grout will look great at first, but shower walls and walk in shower floors will soon show unsightly staining. White is best reserved for dry, non-trafficked areas only.

External tiles should be frost proof (in recent years many terraces that have been good for 30 years, have suddenly suffered frost damage). Again darker or minimal jointing is best for trafficked areas. All terraces exposed to the sun should ideally use a flexible grout and jointing compound to avoid cracking and leaks.

LAMINATE FLOORS IN THE RIGHT AREAS ONLY

Laminate floors look great when in good condition, but cheaper versions will suffer joint movement, surface spalling and even dramatic heave, if used in damp or humid locations (bathrooms, kitchen or low levels). Real wood, block parquet flooring will be more tolerant and hard wearing, but is of course, much more expensive. If you do opt for laminate or wood, ideally save it for low trafficked, dry upper floors e.g. bedrooms. The best location for laminate is an upper floor of an outdated apartment. Low damp risk, solidity of floors and thicker composite floor tiles make laminate a viable choice, but inclusion of a vapour check membrane, foam rubber layer and good edge detailing (to allow for movement), is essential. Lay boards towards the light source (main window) to avoid any slight joint movement from being exaggerated (due to shadow). If possible, choose board joints with a deliberate 'V' indentation, which is less likely to catch and spall and will cope much better with slight movement. Cheaper versions will not tolerate mopping.

COMMUNAL POOL

If you swim a lot and like your own space, nothing beats having your own pool. Pool maintenance will however take up quiet a bit of your time, and larger tasks, such as retiling or

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new filtration equipment, will be costly (though much cheaper than in the UK). If your pool cracks you may have to face very costly repairs, which may include slope retention. If you don't live in Spain and fail to employ a pool cleaner, you will need to spend the first few days of each visit getting your pool ready for swimming which is no holiday! If you plan to rent your property out, a pool may be a must for most tenants, but they will want it pristine and operational, so unless you have a pool maintenance company at your service, you may be better choosing a property with a communal pool, which will normally be clean and well maintained for the whole swimming season. Most Spanish villages and towns also have public swimming pools, though the swimming season may be quite short e.g. mid June to end of August. A roof terrace or garden located Jacuzzi may be the best half way option if you want some luxury and a chance to cool off without too much maintenance.

THE RIGHT SITE & LOCATION

Increased exposure to the weather will increase maintenance requirements. Building elements can suffer damage from wind, driving rain, frost, damp, flash flooding, sun exposure etc. As mentioned in previous articles facing South/ SE half way up a not too steep hill, is generally the best option to avoid over exposure to wind, rain, groundwater frost etc. Being the wrong (north) side of the hill will mean that the property will not benefit from the rapid drying and warming effects of the Spanish sun (potentially remaining damp and cold for most of the winter). Sunlight also helps to reduce problems such as mould on inner walls. There is however such a thing as too much sun exposure. Unless detailing is good, some build types may suffer significant thermal movement if over exposed to the sun all day. Shade provided by trees or other buildings may help to ensure a more stable microclimate around the property. (Trees that are too close should be avoided).

Serious structural repairs may be required if the house has been built on inadequate foundations for the substrate type. While there are many solid properties in Spain, others (though often quite grand above ground) have been built with virtually no consideration for the poor substrate below, steep slopes also require additional care, but many flat sites can also have problems, making structural cracking a likely future problem. Careful inspection of the building and site is important if these issues are to be identified and avoided.

Summary

There are of course many more features that can help to keep maintenance to a minimum, but

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if you can find a property that meets the above criteria, you are generally on the right track to a lower maintenance future.

It is important to realise than properties differ greatly. Even the same design on a different site may have different maintenance implications. Never be blinded by a new paint finish, an unpainted house with a good roof overhang, set on decent foundations is generally a better low maintenance buy than a pristine flat roofed 'box' on the edge of a cliff, 'new' does not necessarily mean trouble free. Of course practicality is often sacrificed for beauty and the ideal home is that which satisfies the owner's practical and aesthetic needs. For this reason, less practical high maintenance homes may still make very good long-term investments, but unless you have the funds for upkeep, opt for the low maintenance choice.

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