

Renovating a traditional Madeiran house

What to keep and what to change

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DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

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Stone walls, hipped roofs and basalt stonework: good renovation keeps the character of the house and makes it comfortable for today.



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Traditional Madeiran houses follow their own building logic: thick stone walls, basalt stonework, clay roof tiles and openings designed for the island's climate. Renovating them well means respecting that logic while solving damp, comfort and safety.

Start with a survey

Before any drawing, carry out an accurate measured survey and a technical inspection: condition of walls, roof and floor timbers, cracks, rising damp and services. The diagnosis decides what stays, what gets repaired and what must be replaced.

What is worth keeping

- Stone masonry walls: they have high thermal mass and, properly treated, will last centuries more.
- Door and window surrounds, especially in dressed basalt.
- Recoverable timber structures, such as coffered ceilings and floorboards.
- Window proportions and façade alignments, which shape the look of the street.

What can change

- Interior layout, for modern kitchens and bathrooms.
- Insulation on the inside or in the roof, using breathable materials that do not trap moisture in the stone.
- Windows with double glazing, keeping the traditional design and colour.
- Complete services: electrics, water, drainage and ventilation.

Damp: the costliest mistake

Cement renders and plastic paints on old stone trap water and damage the walls. Choose lime mortars and mineral paints, and deal with the source of damp, such as outside drainage and ventilation, before hiding the symptoms.

Permits and protected areas

Work only inside the house, without touching the structure or the façade, may not need a permit. That exemption does not apply if the building is listed or being listed, or if it is in a protection zone: then the work needs an opinion from the Regional Directorate for Culture. In Funchal's historic centre, the master plan (PDM) also sets its own rules for façades, roofs, materials and colours. Check with the municipality, right at the start, which rules apply to the property. If there is older unpermitted work, sort out its legalisation in the same process.

Decision checklist

A good renovation does not look new: it looks like the same house, finally comfortable.

QUICK CHECKLIST

- Survey and technical inspection done
- Features to keep identified
- Damp strategy defined
- Planning and heritage rules confirmed
- Budget with a margin for surprises, which old houses always bring

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