

# HELLO! INVITES YOU INSIDE THE INCREDIBLE LOIZAGA TOWER TO MEET THE FAMILY BEHIND ITS RECORD-BREAKING ROLLS-ROYCE COLLECTION

**I**n the Basque country, just a few minutes from Bilbao but hidden away in a spectacular wooded valley, stands Loizaga Tower, a 5,000-square metre fort which dates from medieval times. Entering it, we're transported not only back to that era, but also to another equally fascinating but more recent period, thanks to its magnificent collection of classic cars, one of the best in the world. And especially impressive is the fleet of vintage Rolls-Royces, whose models all hail from the

company's British-owned past.

Following the death of the man behind this treasure trove, Miguel de la Via, in 2009, his nephews and nieces are preserving his legacy, with his niece, Maria López-Tapia de la Via, in the driving seat. We talked to her about her uncle's twin labours of love – building his collection and reconstructing the fort.

**It's incredible to find a museum like this in this beautiful, mountainous retreat. Why here?**

"It's the perfect spot. This valley,

Galdames, is situated in the district of Encartaciones, which was home to my maternal grandparents, Benjamin and Leonor. My uncle spent his childhood running around the ruins of the tower. It was a place that meant a lot to him, and it was here that he was able to express his artistic side and honour his roots."

**How many cars are there?**

"There are two collections. The most important is the Rolls-Royce collection, which is made up of 45 models manufactured over a ▶

The magnificent Loizaga Tower near Bilbao in northern Spain is home to one of the world's most important private collections of vintage cars, built up by the late Miguel de la Via. His niece Maria (right, in green top) lovingly preserves his legacy, helped by her family. They pose here alongside two Rolls-Royce Silver Ghosts









Miguel undertook two great labours of love: restoring the fortress, and amassing the magnificent car collection which fills it. The ballroom (above) contains four of his 12 Rolls-Royce Phantoms, standing proudly alongside a grand piano, around which the younger members of the family cluster (far right). The baronial hall, meanwhile, is home to 11 different examples of Silver Ghosts (right). Left: the current head of the Loizaga museum, Maria



period of more than 100 years. The second is made up of 30 prestigious vintage, classic and sports cars of various makes. We even have a genuine English fire engine that regularly takes part in the Historical Commercial Vehicle Run between London and Brighton."

**How would you describe all of this?**

"An English historian who's a Rolls-Royce expert said that the baronial hall that houses the Silver Ghost exhibition 'takes your breath away when you see it for the first time and leaves the visitor with a lasting impression of motoring's golden years'.

"The smells, the woodwork, the oil, the headlights make you dream of the thousands of trips taken in these cars and the lives of the passengers who took them. And all of these imposing machines have ended up here in Galdames, arranged exactly as my uncle wanted them. It's a carefully crafted collection, expertly put together, and it's alive – all the cars still work!"

**What was the first car your uncle acquired?**

"His first Rolls-Royce was a white Silver Shadow, a milestone in the brand's history. When he started work on the fort in 1985, he bought a 1955 Silver Wraith that belonged to the British royal family, and then a Silver Cloud I.

"After that, he decided to try to get his hands on at least one example of each Rolls-Royce model built when the company was still British-owned. I say at least one, because when it comes to the Silver Ghost we actually have 11 different examples. That's because up until 1945 the same chassis would be fitted with totally different bodywork, just as if you were getting a custom-made suit.

"Building the collection ran in parallel with the rebuilding of the tower, which Miguel started with a pencil and a sketch and no idea of where it would go."

**The Phantom IV is the most important**



**'The Rolls-Royce collection is made up of 45 models manufactured over a period of more than 100 years. It's alive – all the cars still work!'**



**Rolls you have here. Can you tell us about it?**

"It was vital to include it in a collection that aspires to be complete, but it was complicated because there are only 17 examples left in the world. It is the most exclusive model, and it was manufactured in the 1950s to be used by royal families and heads of state.

"The one we have here was the last but one to be built, and it belonged to the Emir of Kuwait, who bought three in 1956. There are three more examples in Madrid, which are used for state visits and official occasions, such as the recent coronation of King Felipe VI."

**Which of the other cars have an intriguing history?**

"Each of them has its own

story, but the convertible Silver Ghost limo is special because it was my uncle's favourite. It was sent from the factory in England to Melbourne in 1912 for the city's mayor, and it has since travelled the world, winning prizes for its elegance. When it came off the boat in Bilbao from Australia, it was driven to the fort. What a spectacle that was.

"There are other models that had illustrious owners, like the Duchess of Marlborough's 1913 Silver Ghost or the Phantom VI belonging to *Lawrence of Arabia* producer Sam Spiegel, who used it in the film. And the oldest – and, ironically, the slowest – is an Allen Runabout from 1898 that belonged to





**'My uncle Miguel spent his childhood running around the ruins of the tower... When he rebuilt it, he started with a pencil and a sketch and no idea of where it would go'**

British racing driver Stirling Moss."

**When did your uncle start getting interested in cars?**

"As his sisters will tell you, they remember Miguel with a pencil in one hand and a toy car in the other. He learned to drive when he was practically still a child and his first cars were sports ones such as Jaguar and Ferrari, or American makes like Cadillac and Buick. So no one could have imagined that he'd go on to build the most extraordinary collection of vintage cars.

"Nowadays the museum is the mainstay of Loizaga, but we also host other car-related events, such as rallies featuring classic names such as Hispano-Suiza, Jaguar, Ferrari and Porsche. Not to mention motorbikes: over a hundred Harley-Davidsons who were taking part in the annual BilboRoad event dropped in recently."

**Besides being a great businessman, Miguel was also a painter and he loved playing the piano. Has anyone in the family inherited this artistic streak?**

"We all love music and art, but the artist of the family is, without doubt, my Aunt Sofia, Miguel's widow. They spent hours painting together and would hang their paintings in the drawing rooms. Together they decorated the fort and bought things from all over the world to create a cosy atmosphere here. My Aunt Sofia still pores over every detail and has very original ideas, such as the eye-catching lights that hang from the ceiling."

**And did your uncle pass on his passion for cars to you?**

"I don't know if I would call it a passion, but he did make us realise how fascinating the history of the automobile is, which isn't hard when you see these authentic works of art on wheels. What we are passionate about, and feel very proud of, is his life's work. It's an exceptional legacy that we must work hard to preserve. It's







Miguel, who died in 2009, and his wife Sofia decorated the fort's spectacular rooms to create a cosy atmosphere, filling them with objects from around the world. Both bedrooms (below left) and kitchen (below) retain a distinctly medieval air, with the ovens in the latter still fired by wood

one of the gems of Biscay's cultural heritage and a key element in the development of tourism here, which is something he too would have been very proud of."

**Can you tell us what is so special about the fort?**

"It has an enormously attractive history and architecture. It's a unique space where the medieval meets the mechanical age – the history of the area and the technological development of the automobile over two centuries. With this as a backdrop, we put on a wide range of educational and cultural activities. We're also thinking of publishing a book telling the fascinating story of the rebuilding of the tower and the collection."

**Is it true that rebuilding the fort stretched over three decades and that it was entirely your uncle's doing?**

"Yes, every part of the fort has been designed by Miguel. You can sense his taste and iron







**'He made us realise how fascinating the history of the automobile is, which isn't hard when you see these authentic works of art on wheels'**

The Phantom IV was designed for use by royal families and heads of state, and this one (above) belonged to the Emir of Kuwait. Below: the luxurious interior of a 1912 Silver Ghost. Right: the second generation of Miguel's family pose aboard a 1925 Isotta Fraschini. Below far right: the tower, surrounded by a moat (below right)



willpower in the magic of the tower. It's a dream come true."

**And have you always held family gatherings here?**

"Yes. I remember the joyful expression on my uncle's face when we arrived for a get-together and there would be a new pavilion or amazing car in the garage to show us. On his birthday he would surprise us with a choir or even a mariachi band... He was very lively and had a great sense of humour."

**What do you yourself like most about this place?**

"I like the splendour of being out in the middle of the countryside and I like the admiration my uncle inspires in the visitors, many of whom call him a 'renaissance spirit'."

"I also like the fact it is in the Encartaciones district, which is a fantastic place. It has everything, and

many people are surprised to discover that it was here that the wealth of Biscay was created. Not far from here you can visit an open mine or see how they made nails in medieval times. Or you can watch machines from the Industrial Revolution in operation in a textile factory."

**Finally, can you tell us why it is called the Loizaga Tower?**

"The Loizaga family constructed the fort during the 14th century. There's no reliable information on how the original tower looked, so it was rebuilt in the Romantic style. One writer describes it as 'the fantasy of a modern-day prince'."

INTERVIEW: LOLA DELGADO  
PHOTOS: ANDREA SAVINI

HAIR: PILAR DIAZ FOR MARCEL ARRANZ  
MAKE-UP: ANA VEGA FOR EDERLAN



**'This is a unique space, where the medieval meets the mechanical age... You can sense my uncle's taste and iron willpower in the magic of the tower. It's a dream come true'**

