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La dolce cheaper: Bargain hunting in Italy's villages

Abandoned towns across Italy's hilltops are being rescued to become affordable - and ancient - holiday homes. Laura Latham sees life return

Published: 25 April 2007

If you've ever wished that you could live in one of the charming tumbledown hamlets scattered across the hills of the Italian countryside, you might be about to get lucky. Developers have (at last) realised that people looking to own in Italy want a property that's as authentic as possible, so they're buying entire abandoned villages and turning them into modern homes with ancient credentials.

These villages, or borgi, usually date back to medieval times, and were once thriving communities. The locals moved away, but their homes are now coming up for sale all over the country. There are two options: some developers are selling homes that they have already restored, while others wait for a buyer to commit, so they can do the work to the buyer's specification.

Either way, prices of restored properties vary depending on where you buy, but that doesn't mean that your home will be isolated or expensive. "Interest in this type of property is growing," says Nikki di Girolamo of House Around Italy, who is based in the Abruzzo region. "Some people are interested in buying a whole borgo and doing it up before selling on while others just want an individual property, where you feel as though you're back in the past."

Di Girolamo says that the ethos of borgo living is "restore, renovate or re-use", where original materials, such as traditional Maiella stone, feature heavily. Interiors of the apartments, or narrow townhouses, usually offer original vaulted ceilings and small but attractively restored living areas. Some borgo properties are being sold as seen, and she has a large number of unrestored apartments in such projects starting from as low as £20,000 for a small studio or one-bedroom apartment, to £40,000 for something larger.

"For something habitable, you'll pay from around £45,000 upwards," she says, "but it depends on where you are. I just sold an apartment in need of a lot of work for £10,000." In these developments, restoration will probably set you back around £650 per square metre, and di Girolamo says that her company can provide help with finding architects and builders. However, she adds, one reason that people prefer to buy from developers is that it takes away the hassle of renovating and is safer because, due to mass immigration in the mid-20th century, ownership of old properties may not always be clear cut.

Keeping it local is certainly the key for the company renovating Calitri, a hilltop town around an hour inland from the Amalfi coast. Property here is cheap because of the distance from the sea and a lot of it has been left to deteriorate. "Calitri is a showcase for this type of redevelopment," says Eddy Compton of Realpoint Italy. "The developers are working with the council to regenerate places from which people have moved away."

Calitri is one of a number of projects by the same developer that Compton is selling in southern Italy. He says property in these revamped villages has been deliberately priced low to encourage buyers to bring life and money back into abandoned locations. His properties start at £30,000, but that includes renovation and basic furnishing. Two-bed apartments and small houses cost from around £45,000, again, including all work.

One successful holiday development which, admittedly, can feel rather empty outside the main season, is Castello di Castelbianco on the Ligurian coast, near Genoa.

The borgo has been beautifully redeveloped by Realinvest, and has won awards for design and attention to detail. Prices start at £92,000 for a studio with garden, and £165,000 for a house with one bedroom. To ensure you get the real deal, visit the borgo before you buy, and make sure you're in a village that's getting back a traditional sense of community.

Time will tell, but some of these towns may yet evolve into theme parks.

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Buyers' guide

* Because of their age, apartments in borgi tend to be very small with little outside space.

* Allow 12 per cent on top of the property's purchase price to cover the notary fees, taxes, and estate agent costs.

* Italian property ownership is complex. Get your lawyer to check all title deeds and paperwork relating to your purchase.

* If your purchase includes renovation, then make sure you check that the developer offers contracts that commit them to a certain standard of work and stipulate the timescale for completion.

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