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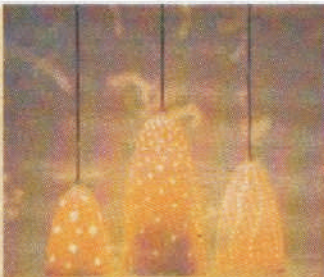
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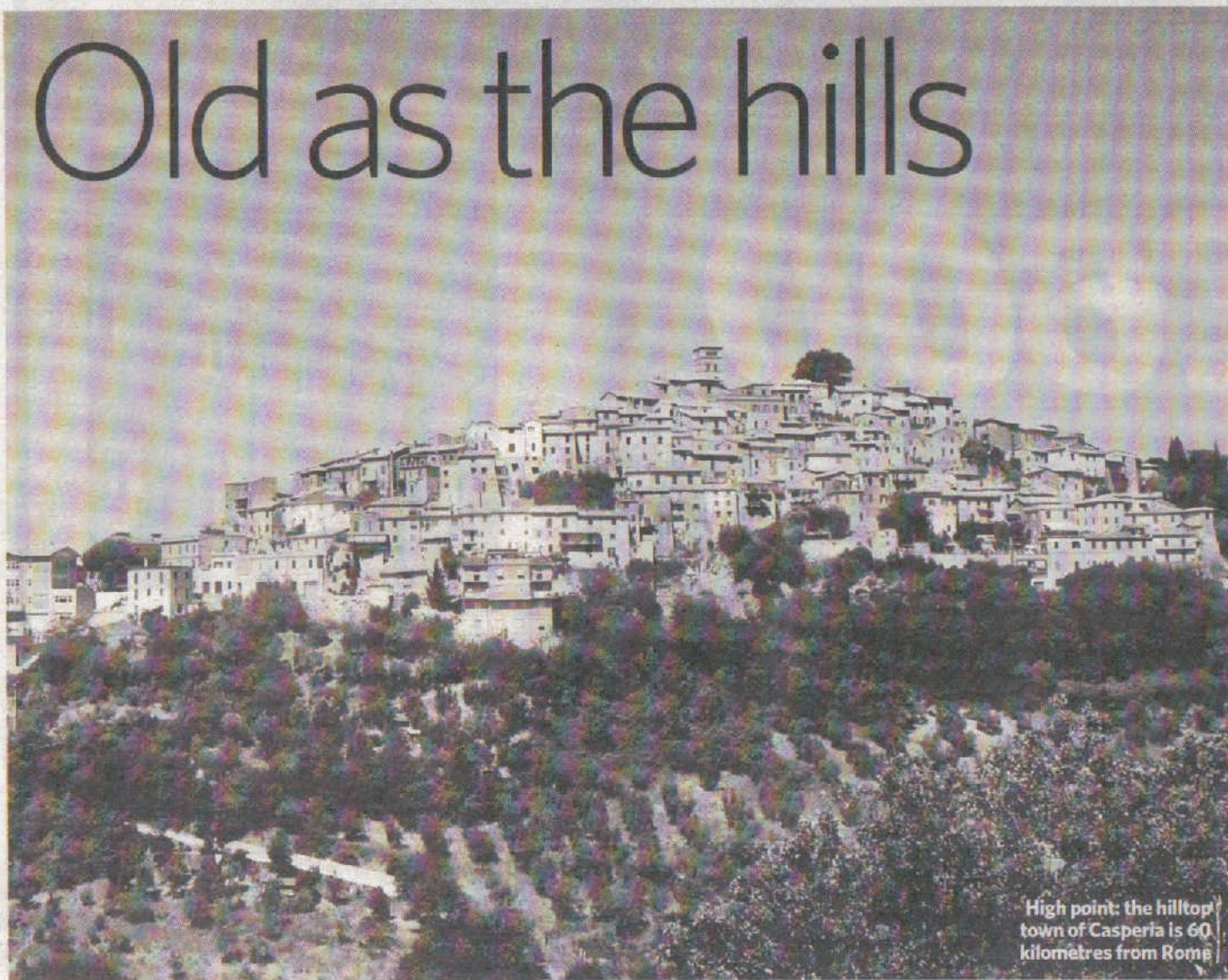
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OVERSEAS

Old as the hills



High point: the hilltop town of Casperia is 60 kilometres from Rome

Rome is one of the most expensive cities in the world. But in the countryside outside the city, **Laura Latham** finds some of Italy's best-value, and most beautiful, getaways



Above: Casale Vigne Santi is a traditional, stone house, fully renovated, with two bedrooms, two bathrooms and views of the Sabina mountains. On sale for £250,000, Dionisi Property Search



Left: this restored two-bedroom village house may look plain on the outside but it has a lovely contemporary interior. On sale for £205,000, Casambiente

Right: this farmhouse has permission for renovation into a 212sqm property and it sits in 1.4 hectares of land. On sale for £130,000, Casambiente



British property buyers have long had a love affair with Lazio, where they can get more for



Lazio it is often a question of "the wrong houses built in the right

Long had a love affair with Tuscany but that affection has pushed prices in the region to astronomical levels. Which is a mystery to those who know there are many other areas of Italy that are just as beautiful and often better located.

Lazio is a region still largely overlooked by buyers from overseas. It's just to the south of Tuscany, one of the most expensive rural areas in Europe, and surrounds Rome, a city where prime locations make London look cheap. It has dramatic mountains, beautiful beaches and wide empty plains. Yet, amazingly, house prices here are at least 30 or 40 per cent cheaper here than in Tuscany, or Umbria, for that matter.

The local agents, such as Johannes Hermel of local specialists Casambiente, are seeing more interest from those seeking idyllic locations that are cheaper than Chiantishire. Lazio, he says, is unlikely to stay a secret for long.

"We're seeing a new trend in people buying close to Rome - but not too close," Hermel explains. "Lazio is attracting buyers who appreciate it's a beautiful area less than an hour from the city and airport."

According to Hermel, Lazio, which includes Rome, Bracciano (where Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes tied the knot) and Frascati within its boundaries, is under-appreciated and under-priced, considering its location and all it has to offer. When buyers on smaller budgets come to him looking for something in Tuscany, he often

Lazio, where they can get more for their money. "A habitable property with land in Lazio will cost from around £800 per square metre. In Tuscany you will barely find a ruin for that price."

That isn't to say there aren't lots of glamorous properties available around the £500,000 mark but there are also lots of cheaper options of the kind not seen in other areas these days. Casambiente can find you apartments for refurbishment in medieval villages, for example, priced from around £20,000 for something measuring a generous 80 to 120sqm or country homes in need of work from £40,000.

Two areas that Hermel rates very highly are the beautiful Sabina mountain range, and Bassa Maremma, the coastline joining Tuscany's better-known Maremma area. Here, Hermel says, you can find lovely properties with land in need of renovation for around £40,000 to £60,000. For something not needing any work you should expect to pay from around £250,000 for a



three-bedroom country house and from £80,000 to £100,000 for a good two-bedroom apartment.

There is an issue with Lazio, however, in that although it has stunning scenery and a good location, the properties themselves are often not as attractive as in other areas - this is what keeps the prices down. Though old stone houses are available if you hunt around the ancient villages, a lot of rural homes date from the 1950s, when concrete was the order of the day. Luca Catalano of developer ReallItalia says that in

wrong houses built in the right place. Planning hasn't been as controlled as in Tuscany and a lot of the property isn't as aesthetically pleasing."

Still, if you are prepared to search around, or put some work into renovating a dilapidated house, then you may well find yourself a bargain. Catalano advises buyers to look at the fortified, hilltop towns, which offer prettier and more historic architecture.

Chris and Meg Phillips bought their ruined 12th-century stone apartment in the pretty town of Casperia, 60 kilometres from Rome, in 2005. "It was more of a hovel, really," says Chris who spent a year having it renovated into Il Sogno, a stylish holiday home with two bedrooms, two bathrooms and a rooftop terrace.

"We wanted to be near Rome but not in Rome," he says, "and we love Lazio - the setting, the pace of life, the people and the proximity to Rome." The couple holiday there twice a year while renting their property out the rest of the time, but they plan to move there permanently in the future. They are coy about how much it cost to buy and renovate Il Sogno but Chris admits it "was a lot less than it would have cost in Tuscany."

Contacts: Casambiente: www.casambiente.com, 00 39 07 55 09 17 05; ReallItalia: www.reallitalia.co.uk, 0870 890 9936, Dionisi Property Search: www.dionisi.co.uk; 00 39 07 46 20 55 88; Il Sogno: www.rentcasperia.com

Buyers' guide

■ Rome is within the Lazio region and, as a result, both road and rail connections in the area are excellent.

■ **Restoration of properties in Italy requires a great deal of planning permission to ensure that historic buildings do not end up looking out of character. Check with the local authorities that your plans are legal.**

■ Since January this year all preliminary contracts of sale on property in Italy must be registered with the local tax office within 20 working days of being signed. You will also need a fiscal code, which is available from the local tax office, and an Italian bank account before completion.



Above: Borghetto Biancone is a quaint country apartment with one bedroom in an 18th-century stone building. On sale for £100,000, Dionisi Property Search



Above left: Casa Carmen is a fully restored three-bedroom apartment set over three floors in a lovely village house. On sale for £258,000, Dionisi Property Search

Above right: Casa Latini is an attractive renovated stone house in the centre of an historic village with four bedrooms and amazing country views. On sale for £272,000, Casambiente