



Hill-top Colletta was rebuilt from ruin by a group of architects

There's more to this part of Italy than glitzy Portofino. For medieval charm and peace, go west, says **MARC ZAKIAN**

Eastern Liguria is famed for its flash towns such as Portofino and Portovenere, with their boutique culture and international glitz, where tourists flock hoping to rub shoulders with sunning Hollywood celebs and international footballers.

Meanwhile, on Liguria's discreet but charming western coast, they are happy to let the summer circus pass them by. And English buyers in search of a second home are noting what Italians have known for ages: western Liguria has all the beauty of the east — with its own colourful fishing villages, sleepy harbours and hillside hamlets — but costs up to 30% less.

Rob Dulstone and Jane Hawthorn, from Greenwich in southeast London, bought a second home in Dolcedo, a small hamlet on a Ligurian hillside, in May this year. "We'd been looking in Spain, but when we discovered Liguria we knew this was what we wanted," Dulstone says. "The area is still authentic, with friendly locals and great food, and there are top-class Italian ski resorts less than an hour's drive away."

It took Dulstone, an IT director in investment banking, several attempts to find what they wanted within their planned budget of £300,000. "We started by looking at *rusticos* — small country houses, usually in need of some restoration," he explains. "We

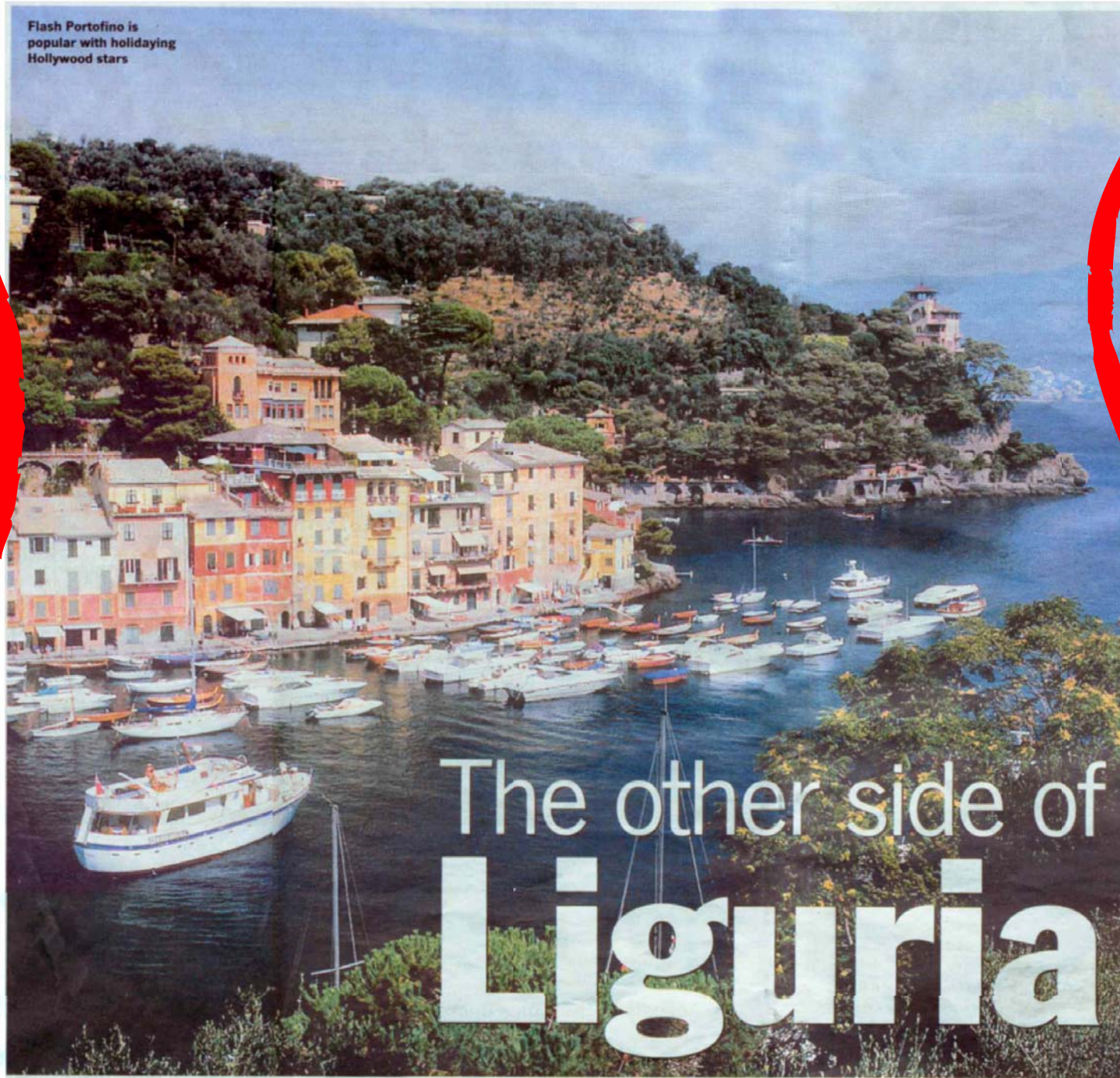
were working through Italian agents who spoke English, but they tended to gloss over planning problems. That is the local way, and sometimes it was due to communication problems — but being English we wanted to do things by the book."

Eventually Dulstone and Hawthorn found a property through Liguria Estates, an agency run by Anne Nathan, an expat Brit who works in San Remo.

"In the end we decided against an isolated country place," says Dulstone, "and went for a four-bedroom house in a small hamlet. We just needed to furnish it, fix up the garden and install a swimming pool. We now have a sea view, and can walk to our local bar and shop. The drive to the beach is only 10 minutes." They are still to complete some of the renovation and install the pool. "But we have the option to cover the cost with rentals," Dulstone says.

In the long run, the couple hope to spend their winters in Dolcedo and summers in Britain. "The Ligurians don't think their winter is mild," he laughs, "but a place where you can wear a T-shirt in November has got to be warmer than Britain."

A hundred years ago, Liguria was the destination for the British. San Remo's elegant hotels and colourful streets are reminders that it was the original Riviera town. Nigel Havers,



Flash Portofino is popular with holidaying Hollywood stars

The other side of Liguria

the actor, spent part of his childhood here and much of Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Talented Mr Ripley* — later made into a film starring Jude Law and Gwyneth Paltrow — was set in San Remo.

"The mild climate attracted lots of

And while Italians want property by San Remo's beach, British buyers often find more value and space away from the water. "The sea-front properties command a big premium," says Catalano. "They are easily double those on the streets behind. It is the

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English," says Luca Catalano, a property specialist with Realinvest. "They would winter here, and there is still an English tennis and bridge club. There are some beautiful villas along the Corso di Inglese [English road], some of which are still connected with the original British settlers."

same across Liguria. If you insist on being right by the beach, a two-bedroom flat in San Remo will cost about £300,000. But it also has a very attractive old centre, where property is cheaper."

Nathan agrees. "The old San Remo is charming. The houses date from the

1700s and are full of character," she says. "The Italians tend to avoid them, but young British buyers in search of something slightly Bohemian fall in love with them. You can find a one-bedroom flat with a sea view here for £150,000."

If money is no object and you want to be part of the Riviera jet set, go to Alassio. "It's western Liguria's Portofino," says Catalano. "It has the best beaches this side of Genoa and a two-bedroom sea-front flat will set you back at least £500,000." He has just started work on the conversion of an art deco villa in Punta Murena into flats and studios with private access to a beach.

If you are on a budget and want lots of space for your cash then go inland, advises Catalano. "Drive half an hour inland from the coast and there are beautiful ranges of hills and

mountains, where you can find old country houses for as little as £50,000."

For a medieval property with modern amenities, however, six miles inland from the Ligurian coast is Colletta. This hill-top town was abandoned in the 1970s and was disappearing into the undergrowth until a group of architects bought it and converted it into a "cyber" village. Preserving the medieval exterior, they transformed the village into 60 apartments, and built a communal swimming pool, a restaurant and a bar. Most significantly, they put the whole village online, so that people can live and work from Colletta.

Other than five permanent residents, most of the owners use Colletta as a second home — even if it is one they spend half the year in. The Brits make up the largest percentage of

non-Italian buyers. Maxine Broadhurst, from Cambridgeshire, who works in publishing, bought a two-bedroom flat in Colletta in 2002. "My husband, Simon, loves Italy, and his attention was attracted by a late-night television programme about an internet village in the Ligurian hills. We'd been thinking about buying a second home in Italy for some time, so we investigated."

"As soon as we got there I knew it was right for us. It's a beautiful village, and the Italians are fantastic — warm, easy-going and their attitude to young children is superb. My daughter thinks Colletta is her own private castle."

Colletta offered the Broadhursts a turnkey solution. They bought their two-bedroom flat for £200,000, and the annual service charge of about £930 pays for all exterior maintenance.



Colletta combines medieval charm with modern technology



Portofino is well known among Brits, but property is expensive



The Talented Mr Ripley depicts San Remo's glamour

When Broadhurst started renting out the flat she realised that she could cover the mortgage, so in 2003 she bought another flat as an investment property, which she lets out for £450 per week in low season up to £950 per week in high season.

"We go out there for about six



weeks a year," she says. "Our children will be in school for another 15 years so we can only visit during the peak season. When I calculated what all our annual holidays were going to cost, it worked out cheaper for us to buy."

"Colletta is great if you're looking for a friendly, cosmopolitan environment," enthuses Broadhurst. "You have privacy in your own flat, but it has been designed to embrace Italian life and once you step out of your flat there's a ready-made social life."

With Ryanair flying to Genoa and Easyjet to Nice, both within an hour and a half's drive of San Remo, Brits have started to rediscover Liguria and the Italian Riviera. Maybe — 100 years on — this is the start of a new *belle époque*.

■ The Broadhursts' flat is let through www.italy-holiday-villas.co.uk