

THERE ARE SECRETS IN TUSCANY

Hilltop villages, spa towns and rolling acres of farmland make the unspoilt Valdera Valley the place for lovers of Italy to begin their search for a home, says **Cathy Hawker**

TWELVE million tourists visit Tuscany every year but most bypass the Valdera Valley in the stampeo to Florence or Chianti. Yet for house-hunters searching for value in the real Tuscany within touching distance of both the coast and the region's historical treasures, Valdera could provide la dolce vita.

The Valdera Valley is an agricultural area 22 miles south-east of Pisa with small farming communities hidden between hilltop towns. This is an area of cultivated fields rather than the woods of northern Tuscany or the green hills of Chianti and these rural views have changed remarkably little in 40 years, says Londoner Janice

Balducci. She first came to Valdera in the late Sixties with her soon-to-be husband Ranieri, whose family live near the village of Chianni.

"This is a quiet area with a civilised way of life," says Janice. "Of course there is more development now and farmhouses are opening as agritourisms but it remains less touristy."

The Balduccis live in Casciana Terme, a charming spa town, travelling frequently back to London to visit their adult children. "This location is very convenient," says Janice. "Pisa airport has expanded over the past decade, making it easy to reach London. We're 40 minutes from the Tuscan coast, four hours from Rome and two and a half from Venice."

Ranieri, who was the head concierge of the Berkeley Hotel in Knightsbridge

until 2005, says the reason few foreigners know about Valdera is simple: "People here were farmers without the artistic splendours of Florence and Siena and were not interested in marketing themselves," says Ranieri. "Yet the food, wine and lifestyle are as good as anywhere in Italy."

VILLAGE PROPERTY

In the small hill town of Lajatico, Italian company Realitalia is selling five apartments in a restored 18th-century stone house. Ville Degli Olivi is in the village centre, one minute's walk from the main square and shops, with a beautiful garden filled with olive trees. There is permission to build three new stone houses in the grounds with a communal pool. The architect is local boy Alberto Bocelli, brother of opera singer Andrea, whose family own the local wine cantina.

The show flat has locally sourced terracotta floors and aged wooden beams with under-floor heating and cooling systems. The remaining apartments are due for completion by summer next year and the three houses a year later. Prices start from £200,000 for a one-bedroom property and £250,000 for two bedrooms, with the three-bedroom houses from £494,500.

"English buyers don't know this area well, yet it represents good value for Tuscany," says Luca Catalano of Realitalia. "Prices are about half of those in Chianti Classico where it is increasingly

difficult to find this sort of village property with outside space."

In Chianni, Realitalia is selling Borgo, 11 newly built stone terrace houses at the top of the village with communal pool and gardens. Prices for one- to three-bedroom properties range from £197,800 to £359,600. At both sites Realitalia will provide a full property management service and manage the rental pool.

RESTORED ESTATES

Further west, close to the Etruscan hill town of Volterra, Buriano is a 106-acre estate being divided into 55 apartments spread between a palazzo, borgo and gatehouse. Pre-renovation prices start from £269,300. Or closer to Florence Knight Frank has launched apartments, town houses and villas based around a medieval borgo at Toscana Resort in Castelfalfi with prices from £337,100.

CONTACTS

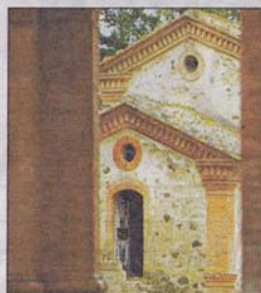
- **Realitalia:** www.realitalia.co.uk; 0870 890 9936.
- **Buriano:** www.buriano.co.uk; 01312 216575.
- **Knight Frank:** www.knightfrank.com; 020 7629 8171.

FACT FILE

- BA, easyJet and Ryanair fly to Pisa and Rome.
- Allow between 10 and 15 per cent for buying costs in Italy.



From £197,800: Borgo, Chianni. New stone houses with communal pool and gardens. Realitalia (www.realitalia.co.uk)



From £269,300: Buriano estate (above and top). www.buriano.co.uk



Rural delight: tranquil Valdera is a conveniently placed agricultural valley in Tuscany that offers a "civilised" way of life only 40 minutes away from the coast



From £553,000: close to Volterra, 10 one- to three-bedroom villas on a former farm. Through Cluttons Italy (www.cluttonsitaly.com; 00 39 075 8450 100)



At home in Italy: Janice and Ranieri Balducci came to Valdera 40 years ago

BUYING OFF-PLAN

CARE is needed when buying off-plan. Gemma Knowles of GK Italian Property offers her advice.

- Do thorough due diligence on the developer.
- Visit the site. Is work going on? If not, why not?
- Ask to see the *Fideiussione*, the bank guarantee safeguarding your deposit and required by Italian law.
- Ask to see the builder's Certification of Work Quality to ensure correct standards have been applied.

GK Italian Property (www.gkitalianproperty.com; 020 7993 2967)



From £200,000: new flats and houses in Lajatico. Visit www.realitalia.co.uk