

# la dolce vita

## A property agent can cut through Italy's notorious red tape, says **Graham Norwood**

Italians enjoy more than their fair share of beautiful landscapes, historic buildings and stunning art. Traditionally, however, foreign buyers seeking to share in these charms have come up against a wall of bureaucracy.

That's all changing. There is a clutch of new firms, buying agents, offering to help Britons cut through the legendary Italian red tape and find exactly the right home in the right place.

Italy's buying system is radically different from Britain's. Buyers and sellers both pay fees to the same estate agent, with a deposit of 10 to 20 per cent. This is often paid up front, and purchasers usually need local bank accounts. Worryingly, outstanding debts linked with a property must be cleared before a deal goes through, otherwise the debts transfer to the new owners.

On top of all that, there are occasional disputes over homes allegedly built without planning consent. And, of course, relatively few British buyers understand colloquial Italian. The potential for mishaps during a property deal and subsequent renovation work are obvious.

Buying agents therefore make sense. Charges vary, but they typically levy a one-off fee of £500-£1,000, plus a small percentage of the purchase price of the property, too. But they often save substantial sums for clients by avoiding the pitfalls awaiting novice buyers.

"It isn't that there's anything

wrong or underhand with the process, but imagine doing it with no real understanding of what you're trying to do. I always advise house-hunters to employ the services of professionals," explains Karen White. With her husband, Steve, she runs Fervidus White, a buying agency that finds properties for British purchasers in Umbria and Lake Como.

"Usually, clients are busy professionals and don't have the time or the desire to undertake big renovation projects or building works. We have some clients at the moment who are having a house built for them. They just fly out every six to eight weeks to check on progress," says Karen, who divides her time between Sussex and historic Perugia in Umbria.

She says people such as John and Jackie Parkinson from Northamptonshire, who are retired, are typical of many British buyers. They wanted an Italian holiday home, but did not know where to start, so hired Fervidus White. "After a weekend viewing around six properties, we were able to make our choice," John explains.

The couple selected a derelict house in the Umbrian hamlet of Pietramelina. "Subsequent visits sorted out the purchase, as well as setting up bank accounts, and agreeing a development plan with the architect and gardener," he says.

The emergence of buying agents for British buyers coincides with Italian house prices being surprisingly affordable. Values have fallen only a modest 10 per cent since the downturn, according to the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors' European survey, but the number of sales has dropped more, and remains 20 per cent below 2008 levels.

Ironically, this is good news for Britons looking for a bargain. Sellers, aware they may have to compromise on asking prices, are



● Lunigiana, Tuscany. This 250-year-old farmhouse and flour mill is close to the historic town of Bagnone, has four bedrooms and has been restored by the sellers with a stone courtyard, pool, terraces and car parking. £485,000 from Savills (020 7016 3740; www.savills.com)

### Special agent

- Like buying agents in Britain, those abroad know the best locations
- Through estate agents contacts they often get "first refusal" on homes
- Agents speak the language and will be based locally
- They can bargain down the asking price (and sometimes base their fee on the saving)
- They can find solicitors, movers, decorators, etc
- A good agent can also supervise improvement work

now more willing to barter. Purchasers, for their part, are being extra diligent before shaking hands on a transaction.

"Buyers are more hesitant and invest more time, money and energy into negotiating a good deal. They carry out intensive due diligence and research before committing," explains Gemma Bruce of GK Italian Property. She is another British buying agent - in this case in Tuscany and Umbria.

Yet although the market has had a difficult few years, light is at the end of the tunnel. "This year, we have seen an increase in activity in the £800,000-£1.3 million bracket, with several sales of farmhouses in the Chianti area," says Gemma.

More evidence of an upturn is British estate agency Chestertons' decision to open an Italian office, following other top-end agencies, including Savills and Knight Frank.

Sarah and Dominic Gothard, whose main home is in Brighton, hope this renewed British interest will help them clinch a sale on the old mill, near Siena, which they have used as a second home. They are holding two "open weeks" when prospective buyers will be offered discounted stays at local hotels, wine-tasting and lunch cooked by a chef trained at The Savoy.

Tactics such as these are essential in today's challenging market, according to Karen White. "You can't take anything for granted. Make the property as homely as possible with quality furnishings," she says. "In these difficult times, you need to make more of an effort to sell your property."

- Fervidus White (020 7193 1050; www.ferviduswhite.com)
- GK Italian Property (020 7993 2967; www.gkitalianproperty.com)



● San Giorgio, Abruzzo. Casa Rosa is a farmhouse amid rolling hills, vineyards and Adriatic and Gran Sasso. £484,000, Ham



● Cetona, Siena. This recently renovated and three bathrooms. It has panoramic views. Chesterton Humberbs (020 3040 8210; w

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This prize has been supplied by Combe House Devon (01404 540000; www.combousedevon.com).