

Couple who restore homes in Umbria



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Castello di Antognolla

A British husband and wife have found dilapidated properties in Italy and transformed them into luxury holiday homes

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A home in Italy with a 14th-century fresco costing less than £180,000. A perfectly reasonable request? Karen and Steve White, the owners and managers of Fervidus White, the Italian property business, do not regard this demand as excessive. In fact they found such a property for a client, a one-bedroom home near Umbertino in Umbria, for =210,000 (£180,000).

The couple have built a business finding and restoring crumbling homes, mostly in Umbria, which they believe is wilder than Tuscany and still full of ruins, but they also cover Tuscany, Como and Amalfi. They handle the sales paperwork for English clients, a service that acknowledges the extraordinary difficulties faced by overseas buyers when tackling Italian bureaucracy.

Steve, whose mother is Italian, says that business deals are entrenched in a culture of personal contacts. "Throughout Italy, doing business is about personal recommendations. Sourcing craftsmen, understanding the strict planning laws and negotiating prices can be impenetrable without an introduction."

The couple chose to specialise in ruins because there are few other options in Italy, given its prohibitive planning regulations. Italy remains unscarred by new developments, mostly because it is impossible to build a new home in a rural area unless there has already been a building in place. But not all ruins are worth buying. The Whites spend a lot of time sorting gems from the rest. Whether they are looking for a modest apartment, albeit with an early Renaissance work on the wall, or a substantial villa, they place great emphasis on location and architecture. They tend to pick properties that are on high ground — whether crammed into a picturesque crooked hilltop town or perched on a wooded hill — and are keen on features such as vaulted ceilings and historic frescoes.

The Whites' clients want second homes or investment properties that can be rented out to holidaymakers. Umbria is now more accessible than before. Ryanair flies into the airport at Perugia, the regional capital, which is being expanded.

"We recently did a four-bedroom Umbrian farmhouse, which was fully booked all summer for £3,000 per week. Buying in Italy is, and always has been, a conservative investment," Steve says. "If you restore a property, you're adding value but it's never been the country for getting a fast price uplift. Buying in Italy is a lifestyle choice."

And so it was for Jackie and John Parkinson, who have bought a three-bedroom house with two bathrooms in Pietramelina, near Lake Trasimeno. “We spent four months planning the restoration and the work took eight months. Fervidus White arranged everything from the financial aspects to helping us find local furniture that we liked. We come for weekends, for two weeks here and there and for three months in the summer,” Jackie explains. “Our neighbours give us vegetables and olive oil from their vegetable patches in exchange for water from our well. We don’t really visit Florence or Siena, although they appeal to the rental market — we go boating on the lake and spend time in the local restaurants.”

The Whites have diversified into consultancy work, playing a role in the conversion of the 15th-century castle of Antognolla into a Four Seasons hotel. The couple are acting as mediators between the owner, Alessio Carabba, a lawyer, and the Canadian hotel brand.

The hotel and golf resort will be completed by 2014 and include 50 villas.

Carabba is constructing a country club on his neighbouring Murlo hillside and restoring his estate properties to become high-end holiday villas. Alexander Lebedev, the Russian oligarch who owns *The Independent* and the *Evening Standard* newspapers, is rebuilding a hilltop house on the next ridge; it will become his second boutique hotel-cum-personal villa in Umbria, along with Palazzo Terranova, which is already open.

Combined with Antognolla and Murlo, these properties will make the hillsides around Umbertide one of Italy’s top destinations.