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February 25, 2007

Tuscany for townies

Rather than heading for the hills, many Brits are buying in Italy's historic cities, finds Helen Davies



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During the 1990s, Britons were drawn to the Tuscan countryside by sunshine, the idyllic landscape of rolling hills, braided with vines and topped with cypress trees — and above all, by the plentiful supply of cheap, tumble-down properties ripe for restoration. But tastes are changing.

These days, a growing number of Italo-philes are choosing instead to wake up to a view of burnt-red rooftops and church spires and are looking for property within walking distance of markets selling delicious local produce, some of the world's finest museums and, of course, all those designer clothes and shoe shops.

In the heart of Florence, on the Via de'Benci, lies the Palazzo Bardi, a converted renaissance building set around a central courtyard designed by Filippo Brunelleschi, architect of the city cathedral's famous dome. The palazzo, soon to become a second home to at least eight Britons who have snapped up the conversions, is steeped in history: it was here that the original owners, the Bardi family, are said to have introduced chamber music to the world.

The palazzo homes will be ready to be occupied from May onwards. The one flat that remains on the market is priced at €1.35m (£909,000) and has two bedrooms, one with en-suite bathroom, a kitchen, a split living/dining room, an entrance hall with a stone staircase, and a vaulted cellar.

The high level of British interest took Knight Frank, the selling agent, by surprise. "There has been a dramatic change in the last three years," says Bill Thomson, director of Knight Frank's Italian network. "As the country market, especially in Chiantishire, has got more sophisticated and expensive, people are beginning to look around more and considering living in the centre of town."

"People looking to buy overseas often like to think they are branching out. But they still want to buy a newspaper, go shopping in the market and feel that they are part of the community. They don't always have three weeks in a row to take a holiday. Florence and other Tuscan cities are year-round destinations that are easy to reach. You can enjoy them just as much in November as in June."

In response to this growing interest, Knight Frank is opening an office on the ground floor of the palazzo — becoming the first large British agency to set up in the centre of Florence.

The Palazzo Bardi is one example of the kind of property now on offer in Tuscan cities and towns: the high-end community where there is no need to learn the Italian for stopcock or how to manage your own olive grove. Instead you can fly out whenever you like for an instant fix of culture, safe in the knowledge that when you are not there your flat is being managed for you and can be let on your behalf (for a fee) for an average £700 per week — which will go a small way to recouping some of your £909,000 outlay.

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Another upmarket palazzo development is the Palazzo Tornabuoni, which launched in October. A five-minute walk from the Duomo, the former home of Ales-sandro Ottaviano de Medici, who later became Pope Leo XI, though for less than a month, is being restored and transformed into a private residence club.

Owners buy one of 288 memberships, which start at £127,500 for use of a studio flat to £307,000 for use of a two- or three-bed flat, with annual management fees of £4,630 to £11,860 respectively, and additional housekeeping costs. Members can stay at the club as often as they like, if a flat in their price band is available, though stays in peak periods are controlled by a rota system.

"It will be like many clubs, a sort of natural selection," says Michael Brod, sales director for the development.

"Buying into the Palazzo Tornabuoni is about buying into not simply the Tuscan lifestyle, but the Florentine community. It is about becoming immersed in the city, and gaining access to some of the hidden secrets."

Tess Blondel, a textile artist and her husband, Jean, a retired lecturer in political science, both in their sixties, divide their time between a flat in Notting Hill, London, and a three-bedroom flat that they have restored in Santo Spirito on the south side of the Arno river, the Florentine equivalent of the Left Bank in Paris. When they bought the flat in the early 1990s, there were few other British owners in the area.

"It is just far enough away from the big crowds," says Tess. "It is one of the most beautiful parts of the city, yet it has a real village feel. You still have authentic tratto-rias and vegetable markets. We like going to the local bars for the gossip." Because they need to spend more time with elderly relatives in Britain, they have decided to sell the flat and its gorgeously quiet terrace garden, and look for a smaller pied-à-terre in Florence.

Buying a flat in one of the smarter, more historically well-known parts of the city, you can expect to pay as much as you would for a villa in prime Tuscan countryside. A flat with a view of the Duomo in Florence will cost about £6,000 per sq m, according to Knight Frank's Thomson, but for properties slightly away from the historic centre, particularly to the south, prices fall to £4,000-£4,700 per sq m.

"It is more expensive than some buyers think," says Paul Hudson, a director of The Property Finders, a company that helps Britons looking for a second home in Italy. "The price per square metre in Italian cities such as Lucca and Siena will range from £1,500 to £3,000 per sq m, and will vary wildly in a small area. A flat on the Campo in Siena can easily cost twice as much as one a mile away just outside the city walls, so you don't have to be living in the Tuscan equivalent of Barking and Dagenham to get value."

British buyers are certainly not confining their attentions to Florence. Other Tuscan towns such as Lucca and Siena, as well as Pisa, are proving popular. There has also been growing foreign interest in larger provincial towns that offer better value for money such as Cortona, Montalcino, and especially Arezzo, where prices have risen 11% in the past 12 months — against 1.4% in Florence.

Les Dixon, 55, retired to northwest Tuscany over 10 years ago after making his fortune in the mobile phones business, and set up a small holiday rental business based around a farmhouse that he had restored, between Garfagnana and Bagni di Lucca. But, two years ago, Dixon sold it, buying instead a two-bedroom flat just inside Lucca's medieval walls for £192,000 because he found the benefits of town life increasingly appealing.

"I was originally drawn to Tuscany by the beautiful countryside, good food and wine, but I found myself travelling half-an-hour's drive into Lucca more and more," he says. "I like the fact that I have a choice of six decent restaurants within a stroll of my front door, and I can buy whatever I want within a five-minute walk. I like the buzz; sitting outside a bar, with a beer and a newspaper on an autumn evening. The only downside is that Lucca gets very busy in the summer, and living within the walls is rather like living in Covent Garden."

Marzia Ghiselli of Your Tuscan Home, a London-based estate agency selling property in Tuscany, has also noticed a growth in the number of British buyers wanting to live in Florence or the surrounding towns, and it is a trend that she has seen arise over the past year, the greatest demand being for relatively modest properties.

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"The majority of inquiries are for smaller apartments in managed residences that are close or within 10 minutes' walk of a town," says Ghiselli.

Those whose main aim is to use the property themselves rather than let it out make for the periphery of Florence, where there are fewer tourists, or else for small towns just outside the city along the Arno such as Valdarno, Reggello and Rignano.

"But people have to choose their town carefully," says Ghiselli. "Lucca has always been popular, and there is a good train service from Pisa to Lucca and the airport. If you are prepared to travel further, you can get an apartment in Arezzo for half what you would pay in Florence."

— *Palazzo Tornabuoni*, 0870 609 8555,
<http://www.palazzotornabuoni.com/>

On the market

A high-tech, two-bed 200sq m flat in a historic building in the centre of Florence, with a 40sq m terrace overlooking part of the church of Santa Croce. It is for sale for £1.34m with Pitcher & Flaccomio, 00 39 055 234 3354, <http://www.pitcherflaccomio.com/>

A 85sq m second-floor two-bedroom flat, in the historic centre of Florence, has been restored, and has high ceilings and parquet floors. It is for sale for £325,000 with The Property Finders, 020 7518 0335, <http://www.thepropertyfinders.com/>

In the centre of Lucca, a corner flat in a converted two-storey palazzo with three bedrooms, a bathroom and a large reception room. It is on the market for £343,000 with Your Tuscan Home, 020 8245 5033, <http://www.yourtuscanhome.co.uk/>

A newly built, 80sq m flat near the historic centre of Lucca has two bedrooms, terracotta floors, exposed beams and comes fully furnished. It is for sale for £220,000 with Your Tuscan Home, 020 8245 5033, <http://www.yourtuscanhome.co.uk/>

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