

A different type of estate

Cathy Hawker meets a new generation of international owners who are turning Tuscany's crumbling country estates into dream holiday homes

LIKE much of Italy, Tuscany and Umbria have a rich supply of country estates where, for centuries, noble families farmed, raised families and lived lavishly among their stone villas. But as more young Italians migrate to the cities many families give up the struggle to run their estates with their huge overheads and retreat to city palazzos, selling their country residence or leaving them to crumble.

Thank goodness then for a new generation of owners who have the time, vision and money to transform these beautiful ruins. Owners such as Count Antonio Bolza from Hungary who bought 3,000-acre **Castello di Reschio** in 1994.

Today, he lives in the estate's 11th century castello with three generations of his family, renovating ruined properties in the grounds for wealthy buyers from Russia, Europe and America. His son, British-educated Count Benedikt, is the estate's conservation architect and is married to Florentine artist Nencia, whom he met when she came to Reschio to paint a mural. They live on the estate with their five children, all aged under eight.

"Italians have historically gone to the sea or the mountains for their

Owners can hunt boar, bottle their own wine and olive oil, ride Andalusian horses or enjoy a cookery lesson from the chefs at the estate's private restaurant.

These top-drawer properties come with top-drawer prices. Completed villas start from a dizzy £3.1 million with annual maintenance of £48,900. This is a Tuscan idyll for any remaining cash-rich, time-poor buyers where even a week's rent can top £24,000 (£21,300). The beautiful finished homes are individual works of art, let down only by the "disappointingly little time" that Benedikt says most owners spend on site.

More affordable options

A more affordable option can be found further west in Tuscany on the **Buriano** estate. Nicoletta Novelli, a professor of architecture at Florence University, is overseeing this restoration near the Etruscan hill-town of Volterra and is outspoken about the importance of preserving Italy's rural heritage. "In Italy, we have no culture of restoring ancient rural buildings," says Novelli.

"Foreigners have saved these properties over the past 20 years."

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holidays," says Count Benedikt. "They ignored their own hinterland and that is why so many rural estates ended up in foreign hands. After owning a small property here since 1984, my father bought Reschio as both a family home and business." There are 50 farmhouses scattered around the estate, hidden among olive groves, vineyards and woodland. To date, 21 have been sold and painstakingly renovated.

"We sell to like-minded people who want to enjoy Reschio's privacy and peace and who trust us with the renovation," says Benedikt.

Buriano is a 106-acre medieval estate once owned by French nobleman Baron de Rochefort and more recently by a Swiss plastic surgeon. Two years ago, Scottish developers N2 Buriano bought it and employed Novelli to renovate the three existing estate buildings and create 55 apartments. The best views over the green hills will be from the imposing three-storey palazzo where flats range from a 463sq ft studio to a 1,722ft three-bedroom home complete with impressive vaulted ceilings.

"Nicoletta is a forensic architect, peeling back layers of history to bring



Villas at Castello di Reschio sell for about £3.1 million. The 3,000-acre estate in Tuscany was bought by Hungarian Count Antonio Bolza (below, back left), who lives there with his son Count Benedikt, daughter-in-law Nencia and their five young children



is one hour away and Florence 90 minutes by car.

"People will always default to tried and tested markets in difficult times," says Ian Hensley-Boyd from south-west London who has invested in Buriano. "That's what Tuscany represents for me: a safe haven for my money with the added pleasures of good culture and excellent food and wine, all within two hours of London."

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From £318,600: freehold, pre-renovation sites at Buriano, a 106-acre medieval estate an hour from Pisa. Call 01312 216575, or visit www.buriano.co.uk

out the best in a building," says Neil McAllister of N2 Buriano. "Once, this estate was a large town with 300 people working here."

Freehold pre-renovation prices at Buriano start from £318,600. Facilities include a restaurant, spa and swimming pool in a walled garden infused with wild fennel, mint and thyme. Pisa

Contacts

- Castello di Reschio (00 39 075 844 362; www.reschio.com)
- Buriano (01312 216575; www.buriano.co.uk)

Facts

- Property at Buriano will be completed in three phases from early 2010.
- Renovation work at Castello di Reschio takes 18 months.
- Castello di Reschio is a sponsor of the Palladio exhibition now showing at The Royal Academy of Arts in London.

'It's an unspoilt farming region with wooded mountains and soft hills'



Paul and Rosemarie Belcher, with daughter Sarah, 22, chose to buy in Umbria because of its affordability, medieval towns and countryside

IN 2005, Paul and Rosemarie Belcher from Reigate in Surrey bought Rancale, an entire hamlet in Umbria's Upper Tiber Valley that had been empty for 50 years.

With the help of Stephen and Karen White, local residents and skilled restorers of historic houses, they renovated eight properties, keeping one house for themselves and selling the others. This was the start of Ultissimo, their company specialising in affordable restored property in Umbria.

"Umbria is more affordable than Tuscany and also less touristy," says Paul. "It's an unspoilt farming region with wooded mountains and soft hills. We chose it for its medieval towns and peaceful countryside."

"Setting up the business was never part of our original plan."

Three units remain for sale at Rancale, priced from £240,000 and featuring solid beams, handmade terracotta tiles and antique doors.

"The joy of owning a renovated property in Italy is about combining history with modern facilities," Paul says. "Simple design lets the beauty of the stone shine through."

The Belchers holiday at Rancale four or five times a year, sometimes with their children Sarah, 22, and Rich, 20.

"We enjoy watching the seasons change," says Paul, "and it is wonderful to see the estate brought back to life and old farm buildings transformed into family homes."

For more information, call Ultissimo on 020 3178 4975, or visit www.ultissimo.com.

