

Picture: NEIL MACKENZIE

ABROAD

Immerse yourself in past glories

If you dream of living in Tuscany but are put off by the high prices, the carefully restored hamlet of Borgo di Vagli is the solution, as JANE SLADE discovered



LA DOLCE VITA: Barbara and Alistair Webster enjoy the Italian lifestyle staying at one of 10 available holiday homes in Borgo di Vagli



IT WAS a mammoth task undertaking the restoration of Borgo di Vagli, an abandoned 14th-century hamlet perched on a Tuscan hillside, but when you visit you can see why it was worth the effort. The jumble of stone buildings overlooks a ruined medieval castle surrounded by steep terraces of olive and fig trees, vivid carpets of poppies in springtime, vines, wild flowers and bushes of lavender and sage.

Some 60 owners had to be traced and contacted, many of whom had left after the war, but thanks to the efforts of Fulvio di Rosa, who spent 10 years pursuing his restoration dream, Borgo has been brought back to life and turned into 10 delightful fully-furnished one and two-bedroom rustic residences.

They are being sold on a fractional ownership basis, 10 owners per apartment, costing £37,414 (€35,000) for a one-bedroom and £62,925 (€32,500) for a two-bedroom. Each owner can use any property in their chosen one or two-bedroom category as many times as they like, depending on availability.

The 32-acre hamlet of Borgo is in a fantastic location, within two hours of Assisi, Florence, Pisa, Siena and Rome. It sits on the border of Tuscany and Umbria in the rich Chianti and Montepulciano wine regions overlooking tree-capped hills and undulating farmland,

far from the whine of the autostrada and surrounded by picturesque villages.

Owners have the use of a swimming pool, 15 terraces, a mini-market and a delightful candlelit trattoria. There are tennis courts and horseriding in the nearby village of Mercatale, and 20 minutes down the road in Perugia is a championship golf course.

No extension to the hamlet's original footprint was allowed, so the thick stone walled apartments are very small although exquisite, with most including en suite showers, large fireplaces, oak-beamed ceilings and outside terraces.

There is also internet access and satellite TV. But if you are seeking top of the range mod cons you won't find it here and be prepared for the internet crashing and occasional power cuts.

A mile-long track, just after the spectacular ruin of the Rocca di Pieve castello, leads to the higgledy-piggledy array of buildings which look as though they are on stilts, perched on the narrow hillside. As the website warns, Borgo is a place that is not for everyone.

Indeed, if the drive to the hamlet does not put you off, then the low ceilings of the dolls-house size accommodation will if you are very tall. It is also out of the question for the very elderly or disabled. Steep-pitched staircases, hilly pathways and a challenging

walk up to the swimming pool act as a self-filtering system for potential buyers.

As sales director Lee Cogher says: "People are buying a lifestyle here. It is for those who don't want the bother of maintaining or looking after a property and are looking for authentic rustic charm deep in Tuscany."

ALISTAIR WEBSTER and his wife Barbara bought a share of a two-bedroom apartment in May. They have two daughters at university and divide their time between a handsome property, Ashworth Hall, in Manchester, and a chalet that sleeps 16 in the French Alps.

For Alistair, a QC famed for heading the prosecution in the celebrated Lady in the Lake trial two years ago, Borgo is idyllic and easy to get to at short notice, particularly when a case collapses or is adjourned.

There are regular flights to Pisa, Florence and Rome from Manchester and Leeds Bradford airports, which make it easy for them to travel.

"I like the flexible usage, particularly to be able to come at short notice if there is availability, but mainly we love the cosiness

of the place and the idea that it is far from anywhere," explains Alistair.

They also love the quirks of the buildings and the care that has been taken to restore them with authentic materials.

"Even the roofs look organic, as though they have grown out of the hillside," Alistair adds. "And they have mixed the paint for the interiors with earth to produce the exact colour they would have had all those years ago. One of my daughters has just qualified as an architect and was very impressed with the use of reclaimed woods, stone and slate."

Barbara loves the fact that she doesn't have to clean or worry about the apartment when they are not there and she likes the idea that they may stay in any two-bedroom residence that is available.

"We are so well looked after here. We decided to drive out to Tuscany this time but mainly because we have to go via our chalet in France because it has a leak. If we had one here it would be fixed and we would never even know about it."

She also doesn't mind the challenging walk up from the car park or the steeply pitched climb up to the swimming pool. "We love the fact it is so far and the steep paths are a good

TURN TO NEXT PAGE

PROPERTY: ABROAD



RUSTIC: Kitchens are decorated in a traditional Italian style



NATURAL: The buildings have been sympathetically restored



SLEEP EASY: Bedrooms are in keeping with the local culture

Turn to Tuscany for a dramatic hamlet

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

way of keeping fit." This is also probably why Borgo has attracted so many doctors.

Inevitably perhaps the typical owners are professionals with grown-up children, or semi-retired couples with time to travel. Most are British but there are also half a dozen American lawyers, as well as various doctors, lecturers and professors from all nationalities.

They all love the *trattoria* which serves home-made Tuscan cuisine. Those who speak Italian can chat to Dina the cook, who loves to tell stories of what Borgo was like 50 years ago. As we sat on our terrace, watching the sun

go down bathing the medieval castle in a pink, watery hue, we could hear the comforting animated chatter behind the lit windows in the residences, reminiscent of an Italian version of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*.

Owners pay an annual management fee of £800 (€1,200) for a one-bedroom home and £1,029 (€1,520) for a two-bedroom property, which covers utility costs, upkeep of communal areas, local taxes and staff managing the 24-hour concierge and reception.

Lock-ups are available in the nearby village for owners who want to keep golf clubs or other equipment, at an annual rental of £33 (€50). Apart from the hilltop walks, horseriding,

tennis courts and golf course, there are wineries, restaurants, and within easy reach some of Italy's most ancient cities to thrill the classical culture junkie.

● **INFORMATION:** Borgo di Vagli, one-bedroom residence £37,414 (€55,000), two-bedroom £62,925 (€92,500) - fractional ownership. Prices for one-bedroom due to rise in November. Inspection trips available from £400. For more information visit www.borgodivagli.com or call 0039 (0)575 619660.

Access from the UK is easy with flights to Rome, Florence, Pisa and from Stansted to Perugia, 20 minutes from the hamlet.

● For other properties for sale in Tuscany visit www.toscanahouses.com or call 0039 (0)578 757756.

Agent Chesterton International is marketing studios, one and two-bedroom apartments in a medieval castle in Campiglia Marittima, in the *Alta Maremma* region of Tuscany, 50 miles from Pisa. Two apartments remain, starting at £337,000 (€500,000).

A 19th-century Tuscan farmhouse and cottage in Peccioli are being converted into four apartments and a villa 35 minutes from Pisa. Prices start at £382,000 (€570,000). Visit: www.chesterton-international.com or call 020 7201 2070.

PROPERTY UK

