

Homes

A new way to buy abroad

Until now, owning a rustic retreat in the depths of the Tuscan countryside meant expensive renovations and costly upkeep. But as **Janet Street-Porter** discovers, there is an alternative

Walking in the Tuscan hills is a fabulous experience; you are surrounded by a profusion of wild flowers and intoxicated by the heady scent of wild rosemary, wild thyme and sage. Wild strawberries grow in profusion. It's easy to spend hours following cart and donkey tracks along centuries-old paths linking long-abandoned settlements.

During the Second World War this landscape changed for good, as the young men went off to fight and the elderly and the women and children who were left behind in these isolated farming communities found that making a living from the land was too much of a struggle. Eventually they all moved to towns in the valleys, abandoning these stone-built hamlets of cottages and barns. Bats moved in, roofs collapsed and the olive groves became overgrown.

Over the past decade, property in Tuscany has boomed in value as many of the old farms have become second homes. This wonderful landscape seems so unspoilt, with ancient hedges, stone walling and a profusion of fruit and nut trees – the rolling hills still look much as they did when they were painted by Piero Della Francesca during the Renaissance.

The problem with restoring an old property abroad though is not that it costs a fortune, but the cost of maintenance when you're not in residence. If you rent the property out



Fulvio Di Rosa's restored 14th-century hamlet is made up of villas, top, that feature equipped kitchens, left, as well as a village swimming pool, above

to recoup some of the initial outlay, then there's the worry of wear and tear.

Buying into the Tuscan dream in 2009 is increasingly difficult – there are hardly any ruins in this desirable land-

Dina's meals at the little trattoria at Borgo were rustic cooking at its best

scape that developers haven't already spotted. And with the complexities of land ownership in Italy, getting access to your remote farmhouse is another nightmare that can take years of negotiation.

The Italian architect Fulvio Di Rosa has won awards for his restoration projects in Tuscany, a 12th century hamlet outside Siena, a 14th century Palazzo in Montepulciano and a 10th century convent. He restored a 13th century ruined house for Francis Mayes, the best-selling author of *Under the Tuscan Sun*.

Fulvio's latest project, which has taken more than a decade, has involved restoring an entire 14th century abandoned hamlet, the beautifully situated Borgo di Vagli, nestled on top of a hill in 32 acres of olive groves on the edge of the unspoilt Niccone Valley. This part of Tuscany is a delight,

relatively unspoilt by tourism, with mile after mile of rolling hills and woodland. Home to wild boar, rabbits and birds of prey, only 20 minutes from Cortona, it's utterly peaceful and serene.

It took Fulvio years, starting in 1991, to acquire all the rights to the cluster of houses at Borgo di Vagli and the surrounding fields and terraces. He then set about restoring the houses, using skilled local craftsmen to install plumbing, bathrooms and modern amenities, keeping the exposed wooden beams and thick stone walls.

He has created 10 homes with one or two bedrooms, living rooms and well-equipped kitchens, clustered around a tiny trattoria in the former watch tower. The kitchen has a wood-burning stove, and one of the village's original inhabitants, Dina, has been coaxed out of retirement to cook tasty meals using local ingredients in the evenings.

Fulvio also constructed a spectacular 20-metre pool on one of the upper terraces, curving it to follow the contours of the hillside, surrounded by hardwood boarding. Each of the little cottages has a traditional roof of stone slates, with a private terrace and pergola for lazy lunches in the shade overlooking the picturesque ruins of Pierle Castle in the valley below.

This the first hamlet in Tuscany to be restored as a complete project for fractional ownership. Basically, that means you buy three guaranteed weeks of your property a year and then it is available for more if it is vacant. The allocation of weeks is done on a strict rotational basis, to ensure fairness. Fractional ownership – which means that each residence is offered for sale to 10 owners – means spending far less and enjoying a holiday home without any hassle; Borgo has a resident housekeeper and manager, so your cottage is cleaned and groceries ordered for arrival. A small shop sells bread, ham and the delicious oil pressed from the olives on the property.

What makes Borgo unique is not just the quality of the workmanship which has resulted in such sympathetic restoration and inspired landscaping, but also the fact that it is so perfectly situated for walking, located a 15-minute drive off the main road from Mercatale to Cortona through the thickly wooded slopes along a well-graded white track.

The village sits at the hub of a network of eight hiking trails, which are described in a set of leaflets written by one of the residents. I spent a blissful five days wandering through the hills without seeing a soul. A long-distance hike followed

the ridge opposite to the hills above Lake Trasimeno where we picnicked under a tree. Another day we took a taxi to Cortona, ate a massive lunch of pasta in a local café, washed down with a jug of red wine, and spent five hours hiking back over Monte Spino, Monte Cuculo and finally over Monte Ginezzo, along a series of ridges offering unforgettable views.

It was a good job I did that amount of walking because the meals Dina produces in the little Trattoria at Borgo were rustic cooking at its best, as good as the River Café any day.

One feast consisted of barley risotto with spring vegetables, soup with parcels of veal, grilled skirt steak (marinated in oil and rosemary) with salad, followed by chestnut ice cream.

Another night Dina – just five foot tall with the powerful arms you'd expect from someone used to cooking with no electricity or gadgets – came up with 10 different kinds of thin pizza, with toppings that ranged from wild rocket to spicy sausage. A short drive away, just off the road between Umbertide and Mercatale, we feasted on home-made tortelloni stuffed with pears and walnuts and roast wild boar at the agriturismo restaurant Calagrana. Great food and perfect walking

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