

GIVE IN TO AN ITALIAN PASSION

The Niccone Valley is among the most sought-after areas of Umbria. It is time to join the cognoscenti, says **Cathy Hawker**



Uncomplicated life: Kate Percival

'WORKING ON OUR HOUSE WAS JUST SO MUCH FUN'

KATE Percival from London has lived in the Niccone Valley for nine years. She and her husband Chris have lovingly restored Casa Ciliegiole, a 17th-century nine-bedroom stone and terracotta farmhouse, using energy-efficient technology and cutting-edge design.

"We had such fun working on the house," says Kate 51. "We sourced the stone from a quarry in Mercatale, the shutters and doors from Umbertide and hunted around at fantastic local salvage yards such as Lacle in Pistrino. The Industrial Zone in Città di Castello bizarrely has the most amazing antique shops."

The attention to the gardens has been as thorough: the two-hectare grounds are packed with olive groves and dense bushes of lavender and rosemary.

Umbria still has four seasons, with deep snow in winter and fireflies in summer. "We host house parties and go truffle hunting in November, and harvest the olives in October," says Kate. "Siena, Florence and Gubbio are all close by – or you can live a low-key lifestyle."

The couple now want to start on a new project and Casa Ciliegiole is for sale for £3.1 million through Savills International (savills.co.uk/abroad; 020 7016 3740).

HERE are plenty of stone ruins scattered on Central Italy's green hillsides and plenty of eager buyers have considered restoring one. Cautionary tales of slow and laborious Italian bureaucracy deter many, so it can only be good news that in the upmarket Niccone Valley companies are lining up to help.

The Niccone is Umbria's widest and most agricultural valley, stretching for 17 fertile miles along the Tuscan and Umbrian border north-east from Mercatale until it meets the River Tiber.

Vineyards and thick forests cover the steep hillsides, interspersed with stone farmhouses and castles. The town of Umbertide is five miles east, Perugia airport is 30 minutes south-east and Bologna, Pisa and Florence airports are within two hours.

SETTING THE TONE

"The opening of the exclusive Reschio estate helped to put the Niccone Valley on the map and today it is home to some of Italy's most impressive restorations," says Gemma Bruce of GK Italian Property. "Buyers come for the stone farmhouses with elegant interiors and 21st-century comforts."

The estate, with its 12th-century castle and 50 farmhouses, covers 3,000 prime acres of the valley. In 1994 the Bolza family, originally from Milan, bought the estate and set about slowly restoring the property for international buyers. To date 21 have been sold for around £3.5 million to £7.5 million, a price range that reflects the exquisite restoration. With annual maintenance costs at £46,000, Reschio property is for a select few buyers but has set the tone for this exclusive valley.

"It is the most sought-after part of Umbria for house buyers, with prices on a par with Tuscany and 20 per cent higher than most of Umbria," says Geoffrey Flynn, of Savills Associate Montecastelli Immobiliare.

"Buyers choose it because it is quiet and understated, less touristy than Tuscany but just as beautiful."

RESTORING THE PAST

Londoner Flynn bought a house in the Niccone Valley in 1997 and after a finance career spent mainly in the Far East, moved to Italy full time in 2003.

The same year he set up Montecastelli Immobiliare with Paul Cuthbert-Brown to buy, restore and manage property in the valley. They have established strong relationships with the local community and handle all legal requirements. To date they have



£1.268 million: this 15th-century restored watchtower, Torre la Palombara, has stunning views, a pool and four bedrooms. Through Savills. Call 020 7016 3740



£1.5 million: a farmhouse with guest houses and infinity swimming pool between Mercatale and Cortona. Aylesford International (aylesford.it; 020 7349 5100)



£744,550: a six-bedroom farmhouse near Mercatale, available through Knight Frank. Call 020 7629 8171



£355,100: a restored four-bedroom house in the Niccone Valley. Through Knight Frank, as before

completed 14 projects, taking up to two years to restore long-abandoned ruins into comfortable family homes.

At the top end of the market clients pay £332,760 to £415,950 for a 6,000sqft house, and spend up to £831,900 on renovations to create a highly specified six-bedroom house.

Smaller properties are available in towns and villages. In the 11th-century village of Peggio – population 80 – a 3,500sqft restored town house with roof terrace costs £270,360, while just outside the village a partially renovated three-bedroom house costs £374,355.

Danielle and Stephen Diggle had holidayed around Cortona for seven

years before deciding to buy in Umbria through Montecastelli Immobiliare. Their beautifully restored house in Spedalichio, 35 minutes from Perugia airport, is decorated in Farrow & Ball pale blues and greys while the four-hectare garden is stocked with plants from Italy's largest garden centre, Vivai Margheriti in Chiusi.

"The valley gets fewer tourists than Cortona and the people are welcoming, even when we turn up with our four children," says Stephen, 46.

"We enjoy the local food and wine – particularly the Montepulciano – and visit Siena and Florence, both an hour away."

FACTFILE

- Montecastelli Immobiliare, through Savills, 020 7016 3740; savills.co.uk/abroad
- Aylesford 020 7349 5100; aylesford.it
- GK Italian Property 020 7993 2967; gkitalianproperty.com
- Knight Frank 020 7629 8171; knightfrank.com
- BA flies from Heathrow and Gatwick to Pisa, Bologna and Rome. Ryanair flies from Stansted to Perugia and Meridiana flies from Gatwick to Florence
- Allow 14 per cent for buying costs in Italy



£793,820: five-bedroom restored farmhouse near Peggio. Through Knight Frank (knightfrank.com)

EXPLORE THE VALLEY

Aylesford International has a farmhouse located in 55 hectares of land between Mercatale and Cortona with guest houses, priced at £1.5 million, while Knight Frank is selling a hamlet 40 minutes from family-friendly Lake Trasimeno for £827,740. Two of the buildings have been renovated to provide 10 bedrooms with outbuildings and a chapel. Closer to Mercatale a six-bedroom farmhouse with a successful rental history is £744,550 through Knight Frank.