

THINK of Tuscany, and the gentle green hills of the Chianti region rate as one of the most idyllic scenes. The region between Florence and Sienna, the loveliest of Tuscany's medieval cities, is punctuated by vineyards, olive groves, poppy-edged roads and some of the priciest property in Italy.

To the north of Sienna, close to Florence, is the sought-after Chianti Classico area, says Jeremy Onslow-Macaulay of Casa & Country Italian Property. Buyers typically want to be somewhere between the two cultural cities, where apartments on managed estates start from £282,000 and farmhouses from £1.6 million.

Head south of Sienna towards the Val d'Orcia and Buonconvento and you can pick up properties for a little less. The Holy Grail for house hunters is changing, adds Onslow-Macaulay. Where once they yearned for a stone farmhouse in glorious isolation, the trend now is for somewhere more manageable. Carefully restored country estates, long vacated by their original aristocratic Italian owners, provide the chance to live like a lord without having to foot astronomic maintenance bills.

PERFECT LOCATION

Eleventh-century **Castel Monastero**, an entire rural hamlet and former monastery 20 minutes from Sienna is one example. Owned for centuries by the aristocratic Chigi Saracini family, whose descendants include two former popes, it was bought in 2008 by Eleganza Hotels & Spas, whose portfolio of 10 hotels includes the award-winning Forte Village Resort in Sardinia.

After internal refurbishment, Castel Monastero opened in 2009 as a hotel and spa. Based around the original square complete with bell tower and chapel, where the local community still congregates every Sunday, the complex has 75 rooms and suites, extensive pool and gym facilities and tennis courts.

There are two restaurants, one overseen by Gordon Ramsay, and a spa under the direction of Dr Ali, a former health guru to Prince Charles.

The property for sale, which is all completed, is in pale stone buildings spread between olive groves and vineyards.

Furnished apartments and villas of 775sq ft to 3,820sq ft, many with rooms which can be locked off and rented individually by the hotel, start from £459,400. Homes have traditional Tuscan beamed ceilings, small kitchens and pale terracotta floors. "We are in the heart of Chianti Classico, just



Buy between Sienna and Florence: two of Italy's cultural gems

Live like an Italian prince for less than £300,000 – **Cathy Hawker** shows you how

Idyllic: the 4,200-acre Castello di Casole estate is an hour from Florence

10 minutes from the oldest original wine seller yet only five minutes from the Sienna to Perugia autostrada," says general manager Andrea Prevosti. "This location, along with modern facilities and the beauty of a medieval village, is what guests like."

LIVING IN LUXURY

"Chianti epitomises the Tuscan dream for buyers," says Rupert Fawcett of Knight Frank, but few want a renovation project. "Most want a turnkey project and there is increased demand for quality managed developments where work is under way or completed," he adds. **Castello di Casole**, within 30 minutes of Sienna and an hour from Florence, is a good example.

The 4,200-acre estate with wild boar

and pheasants was formerly the home of the aristocratic Bargagli family and is now owned by American Timbers resorts. There are 28 renovated farmhouses spread over hilltops, the two newest four- and five-bedroom villas from £4.43 million. Fractional ownership starts from £350,600 allowing owners to stay for one twelfth of the year. These are top-end renovations with a pleasing if unadventurous style, aimed squarely at the company's predominantly American market.

This month the impressive Castello, at the heart of the resort, opens as a 41-suite five-star hotel with spa and wellness centre, bringing more life to this exquisite estate.

East of Sienna close to Monte San Savino, Casa & Country is selling seven two-bedroom apartments spread between three converted farm buildings. Inside there are chestnut beams, Tuscan sinks and plenty of space, while outside the five-acre grounds include a large pool. Prices from £419,100 for 1,400sq ft.

CONTACTS AND FACT BOX

■ Castel Monastero:
castelmonastero.com
■ Castello di Casole:
castellodicasole.com
■ Casa & Country Italian Property:
020 7993 2967 casaandcountry.com

WHERE TO STAY

Two nights at Castel Monastero, from £926 per person B&B this September based on two adults sharing, including return flights with BA from London Gatwick and car hire. Through Classic Collection Holidays (classic-collection.co.uk; 0800 294 9320).



From £459,400: apartments at Castel Monastero, just 20 minutes from Sienna



£1 million: for a large villa with land and barns south of Sienna through Casa & Country



£350,600: for a share in a stone farmhouse set in the grounds of Castello di Casole