

WHEN IN ROME (OR PISA)

As Italy opens up to Britons again, *Cathy Hawker* has the best homes for la dolce vita

It's benvenuto to Italy once again as the Bel Paese – the beautiful country – lifts its five-day quarantine for fully vaccinated Britons. From the booted and suited streets of Milan to the olive groves of Puglia and the Tuscan hills to the gothic brilliance of Venice, double-jabbed travellers brandishing a negative test will find a warm Italian welcome.

It never really went away for house hunters, says Amy Redfern-Woods of the estate agency Knight Frank. "The market has been active all year and is busier now than I've ever seen it," she says. "Where once buyers might make two or three trips over several months before choosing a property, now they are much more targeted. Flights from the US to Italy started up three months ago and buyers have come, done back-to-back viewings and acted decisively. The process has sped up and properties are selling for close to the asking price."

Just as in the UK, buyers are looking for more space and a winning quality of life. "The most requested property is a three or four-bedroom country house in Tuscany or Umbria, within reasonable distance of restaurants," says Jelena Cvjetkovic of the estate agency Savills. "Prices for that typically start around

€700,000 (£600,000)." Cvjetkovic says prices this year have held "stable" in the markets she covers. New schemes from the Italian government have also been a spur, she says: "There are incentives for improving the anti-seismic qualities of a property (to withstand earthquakes). And, if you improve the energy rating of your house by two classes, you can claim 110 per cent of the refurbishment costs."

Tuscany also tops this year's list of areas with most interest from international buyers by the property portal gate-away.com. However, it also reports a marked increase in interest in every area of Italy, with Lombardy, Liguria and Puglia rounding out the top four. Homes close to lakes are especially popular, notably Como and Garda in Lombardy and Trasimeno in Umbria.

Proximity to an airport is key – and it's another reason why Lucca has emerged from the shadows of its more illustrious Tuscan neighbours this year. "It's a mini version of Florence, a historic walled city, local and safe," says Redfern-Woods. "It's 20 minutes from the coast and 30 from Pisa, surrounded by beautiful countryside and offers good value for money. Lucca is the absolute strongest market of all for us now."

LOMBARDY
€650,000
It's all about the views: this one-bedroom flat is in a historical cream lakeside villa beside the Villa d'Este on the west banks of Lake Como. Access to 3,000 sq m of communal gardens and a private beach is included, plus a parking space. knightfrank.co.uk



PUGLIA POA
Two sweeping staircases leading to a wrought-iron balcony greet you as you enter Santa Maria di Leuca. The three-bedroom villa's barrel-vaulted cellar would be the ideal place for a spa. gate-away.com



LIGURIA €790,000
Need peace and quiet? The only sounds you hear from this 17th-century former mill hidden in the hills of Portofino is the sound of birdsong from the garden or the waves of the Med. savills.com



UMBRIA €380,000
A five-bedroom 17th-century stone farmhouse between Lake Trasimeno and Cortona in the green hills of Umbria. The main house has a "tobacco tower" and is fitted with solar panels. There is a hectare of gardens including a sun terrace, pool and two annexes. savills.com



TUSCANY €530,000
A skillfully converted 18th-century barn in the Tuscan hills south of Siena with three bedrooms, landscaped gardens, a plunge pool and views over the Val d'Orcia valley. 020 7993 2967, casaandcountry.com



LIGURIA €495,000
A four-bedroom apartment in a 17th-century villa in the centre of Noto, in the northeast of the island, has a large terrace, spring ceilings and Comiso limestone tiles. ly-sothebysrealty.com



LIGURIA €1.3M
A new development of four flats within a classical villa, each with their own private entrance and outside space, plus sea views over the Italian Riviera and Portofino Park. 020 7016 3740, savills.com

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