

Wish you lived here?

Perugia

Get all the charm of Tuscany without its high prices (or tourists), says Emanuele Midolo

Perugia, strongly fortified by art and nature, on a lofty eminence, rising abruptly from the plain where purple mountains mingle with the distant sky, is glowing, on its market-day, with radiant colours," wrote Charles Dickens in his 1846 book *Pictures from Italy*.

Perugia's reputation was further fortified this week when with great excitement — and complete inaccuracy — it was reported that Boris Johnson had spent a weekend in the medieval hilltop town in Umbria.

Over the past few years, Perugia and its countryside have attracted their fair share of British admirers. Colin Firth, who has recently separated from his Italian wife of 22 years, still has a house there. So has Ed Sheeran, who bought a villa with a vineyard in Paciano in 2017. But these A-listers are not the only Brits who have chosen Umbria over the more expensive (and touristy) Tuscany.

David Morgan, 55, works for an international advertising company. He lives in Frankfurt, but has spent lockdown in Umbria with his twin boys and teenage daughter, who go to school in Città della Pieve. Morgan bought a house in Castiglione del Lago, on Lake Trasimeno, in the province, in 2001



while he was living in Hong Kong. "We travelled across Europe looking for properties," he says. "Italy was an easy decision. We fell in love with the country beyond anywhere else."

Morgan and his wife didn't want to be surrounded by other Brits so they decided to avoid Tuscany — which was also more expensive. "Umbria was better for that. It wasn't just a place to spend a vacation, it was truly Italian."

Over the five years that followed he spent almost €2 million in refurbishing a ten-bedroom, ten-bathroom villa that is now for sale for €1.8 million with Casa & Country Italian Property estate agency. "I'm losing my shirt by selling it now," he says, "but it's way too big for me on my own [he is now divorced]."

He tries to fly down to Umbria every Friday. "The best moment of my week," he says, "is opening the shutters on a Saturday morning and letting the Italian countryside come in. All the world's troubles quickly disappear."

Jelena Cvjetkovic, global residential director at the estate agency Savills, says a small community of British expats previously living in Asia, like Morgan, have decided to relocate to Umbria. She

adds that the proximity to Rome airport (about 90 minutes' drive) with its intercontinental flights makes it a more attractive alternative to Florence or Pisa.

"Umbria started a bit like an extension, a spillover to Tuscany, but it has gained its own status," she says. In terms of pricing, great opportunities can be found in the "sweet spot" between €400,000 and €600,000. However, there are areas such as the Niccone valley, near Città di Castello, where buyers with deep pockets can find more high-end properties. A 320 sq m five-bedroom villa with a pool in Valbona Pietralunga is available with Savills for €1.9 million.

"Now is absolutely a great time to buy," says Chiara Pelizzoni, project manager and analyst at Italian property research institute Nomisma. "Prices in the region have started to recover since the financial crisis, but are still below their peak in 2007." Data from Nomisma shows that last year, Perugia's province accounted for 51 per cent of all transactions in Umbria.

Gemma Bruce, founder and managing director of estate agency Casa & Country, who is selling David Morgan's house, says that the rising popularity of the region is mainly due to one thing: "Umbria is good value. It has become more sophisticated. It presents a cheaper, more traditional alternative to Tuscany." Her parents have bought a holiday home in the region.

Speaking of international travel, Perugia airport has retracted a press release in which it said the prime minister travelled to the city last week, explaining it "confused" him with Tony Blair. Whatever happened there, Ryanair flies from Stansted to Perugia three times a week while Johnson only travels by private jet, so there is zero chance of being seated next to him. Another great reason to visit the region.



Above: Passignano sul Trasimeno, on the shores of Lake Trasimeno. Left: a six-bedroom villa perched on a hilltop 9km from Perugia, on sale for €2.5 million through Knight Frank. Right: the medieval city of Perugia, capital of Umbria. Far right: a five-bedroom farmhouse close to the town of Montone also has a boules court and a pool house. On the market for €1.9 million through Savills

