



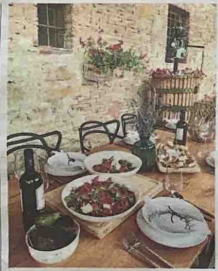
Inspired by the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, six friends have created their own sequel in the Tuscan hills, says *Cathy Hawker*

Here's a way to stress-test your friendships. Buy a holiday home in need of renovation, 5,500 miles away from your main home, with five of your best pals. Even better, buy it in a country with notoriously pedantic bureaucracy, during a global lockdown. What could possibly go wrong?

When six friends from Hong Kong bought a farmhouse in the Tuscan hills above Lucca, the answer is that, while quite a few things can go wrong and disagreements are inevitable, strong friendships endure – just like the experience of the group of retired people embarking on communal living in India in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*.

"As I came closer to retirement my partner, Alex [Baehr, a German retiree], and I began thinking about how we wanted to live," explains Alex Cho, 61, a Hong Kong-based architect and designer. "Retirement for us was never going to be about playing golf and slowing down. We wanted to stay involved with the things we're passionate about, like design, culture and living well. With some friends we came up with the idea of a commune of sorts, a Best Exotic Marigold Hotel of our own. It would be somewhere we could hang out together from time to time and also somewhere to rent."

Their fellow purchasers are all in their fifties and sixties. Julia is a retired architect from Chicago and her fiancé, Graeme, is a Tasmanian writer and homeopath. Betsy, now resident in Sydney, is the international head of a luxury global lifestyle brand. Karen, originally from Scotland, is the founder of an award-winning interiors business. Their combined backgrounds in design



The friends, top, eat fresh food from Lucca, right, at their villa, above

or five-star hospitality mean they share a "strong design mindset", Cho says. "The first issue was choosing a location. We wanted a green and clean environment; somewhere cosmopolitan and healthy, within half an hour of an airport and not too far from a beach," Cho explains. "We briefly considered Hawaii, where I'm from, and Thailand, but Italy and specifically Tuscany soon emerged as a group favourite for its lifestyle. Lucca fits the bill in every way – a historic walled city, somewhere to go for a really good dinner, close to Pisa airport with wonderful countryside on the doorstep."

Cho started the search online before the five original members of the group – Karen joined a little later – headed to Italy to house-hunt. "It came down to a



OUR HOLIDAY COMMUNE

choice between two," Julia says. "The rustic farmhouse in the hills and an amazing urban villa on a small plot. After much deliberation the farmhouse won." Villa Dolce Far Niente is a stone farmhouse and olive mill – parts of which date from the 1770s – in San Concordio di Moriano, a village five miles north of Lucca, in enveloping green countryside. It came with 17 acres of land, about 500 olive trees and a small vineyard. The group paid €700,000 (£590,000). The six signed the initial contract in August 2020, hoping to complete by the end of the year – but Italian bureaucracy got in the way. "The biggest challenge has definitely been the bureaucracy," Cho says. "Despite having worked globally in

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property and design I found it mind-boggling. For example, we wanted to add a swimming pool but the authorities wouldn't let us put it where we wanted it. There's a rule that says you can't build within 200m of a cemetery and there's a church opposite us. This took many months to resolve."

The group finally completed on their purchase in July 2021, a full year after agreeing to buy. Cho and Baehr were on site throughout most of the renovation work, and after about €350,000 was spent on it, the property is now a pared-back beauty: a six-bedroom, five-bathroom home with a restrained palette of terracotta floors, whitewashed beamed ceilings and pale grey woodwork. The olive mill is now a media room with a

separate one-bedroom apartment and there are dining tables inside and out, under the loggia. It is both authentically Tuscan and utterly contemporary. The architecture of the house speaks for itself, Julia says: "Unlike many Italian farmhouses to rent, ours is eclectic, with modern Italian furniture. It feels fresh, tranquil and simple. There's hardly any art in the bedrooms, for example. Instead they are predominantly white, with a punch of colour from the rugs and the focus kept on wonderful beamed or sloping ceilings."

The renovation represents the triumph of "reality over aspiration", Cho says. The group's shared creative background – Cho worked for the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group on several projects – meant

the initial goal was to create five-star luxury and for each member to bring their own design aesthetic to the project. Betsy would bring her cherished B&B Italia and antique Asian furniture to mix in with Cho and Baehr's collection of French antique furniture. The overall aesthetic is perfectly in keeping with the Tuscan setting.

"We realised that this was not about us but instead it was about a sense of place," Cho says. "People choose Lucca for a holiday because it speaks of Italy to them. So while we do have some personal paintings and furniture, we haven't overpersonalised it. We went to Florence to buy specific tapestries and bed covers and have kept the colours fundamentally

SHARING IS CARING

The number of people buying a property with friends or extended family is slowly increasing, says Alessandro Deghe from the estate agency Knight Frank Lucca. He's helping five families who want to buy a small hamlet to live in semi-permanently when they retire. "They've told me

that they came up with this idea because after moving around the world for business for their entire working lives, they never had the opportunity to establish themselves in one area," he says. "They decided to find somewhere to retire alongside their long-term friends and chose Lucca."

The stone farmhouses and historic villas in the hills around Lucca offer a generous amount of living space and grounds as well as the opportunity for owners to unleash their own design style. "Most clients still want a property that has been renovated, but there has also been a

steady rise in those willing to take on a project over the past two years," Deghe says. "I think that's because the market has improved dramatically and there is much more confidence in Italian real estate now. It is much more liquid than it used to be."



"It was to all our good luck that Alex and Alex were on site to oversee renovations," Julia says. "There were many spot decisions that had to be made. They sent us almost daily emails keeping us abreast of it and we were pretty much in agreement with everything they did."

A year ago the plan was that all six owners would spend Christmas 2021 together, but thanks predominantly to Hong Kong's strict Covid restrictions, only four of them made it.

"It was so memorable. Those who made it all brought family and friends and there was a real group celebrating together."

Julia says. "Of course, there were some issues with the house – it's a quirky old farmhouse – but it was good that we discovered them and could sort them out before we rent it. I am so thrilled with how the house has turned out. The solitude, the peace, the way the light comes through the window as you sit in the kitchen having breakfast, the landscape outside for hiking, I would do it again for sure."

And has the proposed Exotic Marigold communal living worked out? "It is not quite the communal living project we first imagined but instead it has evolved to suit who we are as a group, in a good way," Cho says. "We all share the same love for Lucca and have made a commitment to each other. Living such global lives, it's hard to plan a holiday for all six of us to meet, but this house has given us a reason to get together, to eat wonderful food, talk and look over the valley to Lucca in the distance with a glass of wine in hand. That's our version of the Marigold Hotel."

From this summer Villa Dolce Far Niente can be rented out through Lucca Apartments & Villas from €8,000 a week; luccapartmentsandvillas.co.uk



Villa Dolce Far Niente has an eclectic interior – including antique Asian furniture – a swimming pool and sweeping views of the countryside

Tuscan to give a curated feel." Disagreements within the group were minor and tended to focus on the "distribution of work", Cho says. He and Baehr oversaw renovation and construction, Julia and Graeme looked after the legal and financial aspects, while Betsy and Karen oversaw design and will manage rentals. However, because of lockdowns and with Cho and Baehr the only ones on site for most of the time, much of the early work fell to them.

TUSCAN HOMES FOR SALE



€750,000

This wizened beauty is in need of more than a facelift, but its wine cellars, large stables and views of vineyards and woods would make it worth the work. The farmhouse is four miles from the town of Radda in Chianti; savills.com



€950,000

You wait ages for a doer-upper surrounded by olive groves, then three come along at once. This trio of houses, with original pietra serena cornices, are ten minutes from Figline (for 40-minute trains to Florence); cassandcountry.com



POA

Get your hands on this eight-bedroom trophy home in Chianti whose design is attributed to Michelangelo. Its rural location – in San Casciano – belies its convenient connections: Florence is a 20-minute drive away; italysothebysrealty.com



€3.5M

Find blue-shuttered bliss at this sprawling six-bedroom home in Capannori, Lucca. It has a vineyard, a swimming pool and a billiard room. And, just in case you forget you're in Tuscany, the grounds are dotted with cypress trees and 700 olive trees; knightfrank.com