

Home

Standing in her garden watching as helicopters flew overhead, Jo Ashby might have been forgiven for thinking it was a police raid on sunbathers breaking social-distancing rules on nearby Polzeath beach.

However, despite the vilification of second-home owners from Gordon Ramsay to Neil Gaiman during the Covid-19 pandemic, there is no shortage of people looking to purchase their own second homes now that the property market has reopened.

As in Cornwall, some are swooping in by helicopter to view properties. Many with an eye on the international travel situation are swapping plans for ski chalets in Austria and homes in the south of France for a place on the English Riviera.

There are 300,000 second homes in Britain (1.1% of all homes). Figures vary from one in 51 homes in the southwest to one in 210 in the West Midlands, according to Savills estate agency. This includes pieds-à-terre in the City of London, where more than 26% of homes are second properties, to country cottages in north Norfolk, where almost 10% of properties are second homes.

In Cornwall, where just over 5% of properties are second homes, Ashby, managing partner at John Bray estate agency in Rock, says: "Brexit encouraged people back to buying in the UK and now this [Covid-19] has given them another reason to stay close to places they know and understand."

"Three helicopters went over my garden this morning. There is a bit of a frenzy. We are trying to be reasonable and get people not to travel, but you are allowed to and the appetite to buy is there –

although there is not masses of supply and sellers are generally not forced, so prices are likely to hold."

According to Hamptons International, 3.7% of house sales in the UK last year were to second-home buyers, who spent an average of £256,630. This year, despite signs from Mousehole to Southwold warning second-home owners to stay away, the appetite for a bolt hole is stronger than ever: estate agents across the country have reported a surge in pent-up demand from families who have spent nine weeks confined to urban homes with small gardens.

"It's not just about having a weekend home any more, it's about having a second home. If you have spent lockdown in a mansion block or terraced house in London, you want the opposite when you leave –

space, a garden for the kids to run around in," says Andrew Marshall, a regional director for Hamptons based in Marlborough, Wiltshire.

Joanna Cocking, head of prime and country-house sales for Hamptons, agrees, adding that there is a growing trend for the wealthy to keep their homes in London and buy another bigger one with more land in the country. "The one they own in London then becomes the second home."

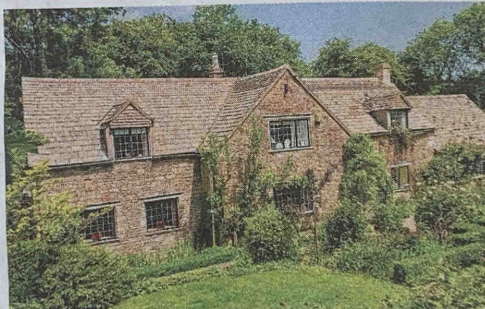
While buyers are understandably keen, sellers are proving less so, put off by talk of a market crash or simply not ready to allow potential buyers indoors yet. Marshall says 20-30% of those looking to sell before lockdown are no longer keen to do so. Mark Holden, head of prime residential sales for Savills



The Brink, right on the Benar Headland in Pwllheli, Wales, has a pool and five bedrooms. Offers over £3m savills.com



Fern Lea in Brancaster, Norfolk, is a two-bedroom former fisherman's cottage on sale for £375,000 savills.com



A secluded three-bedroom cottage in Bisley, Gloucestershire; £825,000 hamptons.co.uk

in the northwest, says he has no second homes for sale in the Lake District. Meanwhile "the phone has been ringing red hot" with potential buyers "from Liverpool to Shrewsbury" who are keen to view properties in Wales, where the market is shut. They may be less eager if the Gwlad party's proposal to introduce a 500% council tax for second-home owners comes to fruition.

In many parts of the country there are plenty of new properties on the market, with some agents reporting that they have more homes available because the usual spring sales surge was delayed by lockdown. Pricing is tricky, though, as the market is slowly adjusting to a new normal.

Ashby acknowledges a change of approach, with talk of "guide prices" instead of "offers in excess of", adding: "We need to be a bit more humble about the situation." Marshall says that there is more negotiation – what would have taken one or two back-and-forth offers before a price is agreed is now taking three or four.

For those willing to negotiate, now could be the perfect time to move, especially in areas where there are likely to be distressed sellers. Gemma Bruce, founder of Italian property agents Casa & Country, says: "Typically there is a 10-15% margin for negotiation in Italy, but realistically you could now get 20% off previous prices. Of course we are getting some silly offers of 40-50% less and, when they are not offensive, we are directing them towards

distressed sellers by asking them to make it as favourable as possible for the buyer, by moving quickly for instance."

With markets in the UK and abroad unfreezing there are no reference points for prices, presenting an opportunity for the brave while others may want to hold back. "In six to 12 months you might get a better deal, but there might be more bargain hunters," Bruce says.

With international travel back on the agenda from the end of the year, some commentators have predicted the market in ski resorts will recover first. However, Jeremy Rollason, head of alpine sales for Savills, thinks that sales could be "suppressed for the next six to nine months". That said, the inability to travel isn't stopping determined buyers, with some offers being agreed "subject to viewing".

Mark Harvey, head of European residential sales at Knight Frank, says British inquiries about homes in Italy and the south of France are down 15% and 20% respectively. He too suspects buyers could get a better deal in six to 12 months' time once "the storm has passed" and the pandemic's economic fallout is clearer, but for those who are "driven by lifestyle and have the cash then why not get on with it?"

After all, in the UK and abroad there is little advantage in having money sitting in the bank with the prospect of negative interest rates and wealth taxes looming – and, after nine weeks in lockdown, the lure of a second home is too compelling for some.

The Hiding Place, on Cornwall's Roseland Peninsula, is a barn conversion with more than eight acres of land; on sale for £600,000 savills.com

Buyers are eyeing up holiday homes. Should they go for a British bolt hole or wait for the market to settle? Carol Lewis reports

FIND A SECOND WIND

