

## **Redhot Virgin ... Virgin airlines magazine 2006.**

Second-home owners also favour apartments with character, especially in Taormina, Siracusa, Ragusa, Noto, Erice and Palermo. As for villas, Mondello, the Palermo seaside, is desirable, along with neighbouring Cefalù, a quaint Norman town. On the east coast, Taormina is billed as the Sicilian St Tropez, even if it has more dramatic scenery and a Greek amphitheatre. Old farmhouses and country estates are also an attractive proposition, especially around Ragusa. Even so, most buyers still opt for the coast or the islands because the rugged interior feels like pioneer country.

Although prices in Palermo and Catania have soared in the last two years, Sicilian prices are 25% lower than in Tuscany, and in some cases far less. Near Noto, a Unesco World Heritage site, un-renovated farmhouses set among almond, olive and carob groves cost as little as €80,000. Not that there is any hard and fast rule: you could find a dilapidated farmhouse for a song, but then spend a fortune refurbishing it. Talented teams can restore anything from a frescoed ceiling to a former abbey, but Sicilian craftsmanship comes at a price.

On the downside, local agents may not be as active or professional as elsewhere, since top properties tend to be sold through word of mouth. As in the rest of Italy, properties can have multiple owners so your lawyer needs to ensure that all the owners have signed the agreement. Communication can also be an issue since most estate agents tend not to speak foreign languages. As a result, it makes sense to employ a local fixer to guide you through the property maze.

But for most prospective buyers, the rewards far outweigh the risks. British architect Charlie Luxton is one of the trend-setting foreigners who have acquired a holiday home in Sicily. His area, the beguiling baroque city of Noto, will attract "a certain kind of person, fascinated by history, colliding cultures and great food and wine". David Harber, ensconced in a neighbouring farm, concurs: "It's a romantic corner of Europe. You don't pay through the nose for a cup of coffee like you do in Saint Tropez. It's an exquisite, simple, local culture."