

Seduced by Sicily The Times Feb 2005

The southeast of the Italian island is cheap, beautiful, and the latest target for Brits seeking the new Tuscany. But, asks Sian Griffiths of The Sunday Times, is buying in the land of the mafiosi such a good idea?

Property prices in Syracuse and the surrounding area are 'up 20% on a year ago

The young architect and broadcaster Charlie Luxton is feeling smug. There are few places greyer and chillier than London in February — but he and his wife, Kate, manager for an architectural salvage firm, are basking in Sicilian sunshine and Charlie is towelling off after a vigorous swim at the beach near their home.

The couple, who are expecting a baby this summer, are part of a group of trendsetting young Brits who have discovered a hot spot they reckon is “the next Tuscany”: an “uncorrupted” area around the baroque cities of Noto and Syracuse, in southeast Sicily.

The advent of direct flights to the city of Catania, an hour’s drive from Noto, has helped this stretch of the island, rich in ruins for renovation, become a property magnet for British buyers, who have snapped up houses for as little as £30,000 in recent years.

David Harber, a sundial maker from Oxfordshire, spent £40,000 on 13 acres of olive, lemon and almond groves and a farm building outside Noto which he plans to convert into a holiday home for his family of six.

He sums up the appeal: “It is a romantic corner of Europe. We have friends buying in the southeast corner of Spain and we find visiting them depressing. There are no package tours here, no tourist developments to cater for northern Europeans. You don’t pay through your nose for a cup of coffee like you do in St Tropez. It’s an exquisite, simple, local culture.”

But the biggest draw is the prices. The Luxtons paid just under £30,000 for a two-bedroom house in Noto a year ago and they have so far spent £25,000 gutting and redoing the interior: new bathrooms, floors, kitchen and roof. Their next task is to restore the honey-coloured stone balconies on the front of the house and paint the exterior a soft pinky colour.

When they visited this part of Sicily three years ago, they fell in love with it. Despite both working in London, they couldn’t find a property “with potential” for a price they could afford, so instead plumped for Noto.

How much would a house like this have cost in Tuscany? “Maybe five times more,” says Charlie.

“Noto is just three hours away but it feels like it’s on the edge of Europe. It’s a Unesco world heritage site so there can’t be any modern tourist development. Architecturally, it’s stunning, baroque buildings in a soft sandstone that glows under the Sicilian sun. The 17th-century cathedral is being renovated and everything is looking better and better.” And at Vendicari, 10 minutes away, there’s a five-mile long nature reserve with an untouched strip of beach.

“It’s the stuff of dreams,” says Charlie, whose next BBC television project, A House in Time, to be shown later this year, follows the fortunes of seven homeowners who are renovating their homes.

Local estate agents confirm that in the past few years English buyers have followed in the footsteps of the Germans and Italians, who have been buying property on Sicily for several years. Pop star Mick Hucknall produces wine, known by the locals as Simply Red, from an 18th-century estate on the slopes of Mount Etna — but most are just looking for a holiday home or a renovation project.

Luca Lo Presti, who runs the estate agency Immobiliare Ortigia in Syracuse, says he and fellow agents are in the grip of a property boom, with prices up 20% on a year ago. “You can buy big pieces of land with rural houses very cheaply. It is like Tuscany used to be, but the prices are much lower,” he says.

And few buyers are deterred by the word that pops into most people's minds when you say Sicily. Mention them to Ayan Gorhan, who left Britain last year with her architect husband to set up the property search agency Sicilian Homes and she laughs. Gorhan says most of the mafia activity is associated with Palermo, the capital, in the northwest of the island.

"It's not a problem in this area. I do not even know if they exist in this area. They are from Palermo and they stay there," she says firmly.

What may be more of a problem, according to her husband, Angelo Campagna, is the inexorable upwards pressure on prices. He says prices are still cheaper than Tuscany — about 25% less for a four-bedroom farmhouse with enough land to build a pool — but that they have risen sharply in recent years.

The Luxtons, meanwhile, feel confident that they bought at the right time. They intend to spend a month a year in their new house and rent it out for £400-£600 per week from June.

Run this rosy-eyed scenario past Bill Blevins, managing director of the international property company Blevins Franks International, and a more complex picture emerges. Blevins agrees that Sicily is becoming more popular among northern Europeans looking for a holiday home as they move away from destinations such as Spain, mainland Italy and France. But he believes that in 18 months or so prices will have dropped 10%-20% as ripples from the stagnant UK property market spread to hit second home sales abroad. He advises waiting until next summer to buy: "You'll get better value then."

And while the mafia may not be a problem, for Blevins the real risk lies in other Sicilian traditions. "It's a relatively new market for foreigners to buy into and old, sometimes incestuous customs carried out by the Sicilians have not always been carried out in accordance with the tax system or the law," he warns.

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Because of the practice of handing houses down through generations, sometimes not registering the transfer to avoid paying death duties, buyers should always use a British-based lawyer, advises Blevins, to check the legal paperwork is correct. Otherwise they could end up responsible for unpaid taxes. Likewise, if a Sicilian owner has borrowed against his house, the loan should be discharged before the sale is completed.

It's a bit of a minefield — and one Richard Bendy has experienced. A renewable energy specialist from Wiltshire, he has bought a two-bedroom property in Noto and six acres of land on a hillside where he plans to build a house. He discovered that there was a charge against the land and had to persuade the seller to pay it off. "It's not the British way of doing things," he agrees. "You have to get to the bottom of things and take time to sort out the detail."

There are other drawbacks to trying to build and restore houses in Sicily, where the local builders turn out excellent work, but in their own time. Because Noto is a world heritage site all building needs planning permission, which can take several months to come through. Bendy's travails in putting a roof on his Noto house illustrate the difficulty.

"I have to get permission from the mayor. The road has to be closed. I have been trying to get work started for the past three months but it hasn't happened. It's not your sort of place if you are going to be British and want your pool built in a week. You have to adopt a south Mediterranean way of looking at the world."

To refurbish the house in Noto will cost Bendy between £50,000 and £60,000. That includes the new roof, rewiring, replumbing, new floors and a new bathroom and kitchen.

But Blevins warns you are unlikely to buy "a pile of rubble", pay building costs and make a handsome profit. "Sicilian building costs are not low and they're higher if you are not a Sicilian," he says.

Despite Blevins's warnings, and even though it's an earthquake zone — in 1693, Noto was razed to the ground — Bendy is certain this corner of Sicily "is going to be a little gem. The thinking is you cannot really go wrong. Even if it takes two or three years to sort the properties out, it will be a good investment".

Charlie Luxton is more circumspect. He would be happy to see northern Europeans holidaying here, but only the right kind of people. "It will attract a certain kind of person, fascinated by history, colliding cultures and great food and wine," he says.

For the last thing these pioneers want is for their find to be corrupted, and they don't mean by the mafioso.

British Airways (from April 26, from £99 return) and Air Malta (all year, from £168) fly to Catania