

# Property overseas: Time to buy the dream

Is this the year you can afford a holiday home, asks  
Zoe Dare Hall.



It's a buyer's market for those looking for a Med holiday home Photo: Thomas Holton

On the French Riviera, the financial crisis is barely causing a ripple on residents' café cremes. Property prices there, unlike here, rose nine per cent last year. But there are good buying opportunities (bargains sounds so vulgar), largely thanks to British owners deciding to cash in on the exchange rate, knock down their asking price and bring their euros home.

“It's like being in a sweet shop. We are seeing price reductions of up to 25 per cent,” says Roddy Aris from Winkworth France.

“Three years ago, prices in the south of France were high and there were few offers. Now buyers really have everything going for them. Not just bargains, but a large number of excellent properties on offer at negotiable prices in some of the most desirable areas – the Cote d'Azur, the Luberon, the Dordogne.”

For anyone who dreams of downsizing in the UK to free up some cash and buy an old farmhouse among lavender fields, now could be the time to pounce. What was unaffordable two years ago, might not be now. Near La Garde-Freinet in the Var, Winkworth is selling a four-bedroom stone cottage with 10 acres of woodland for £649,000, “down 20 per cent on the original price and the British vendors would lower the price further”, says Aris.

For those thinking of easy commuting, VEF (0207 515 8660; [www.vefuk.com](http://www.vefuk.com)) is selling a renovated four-bedroom cottage with indoor pool in Hesdin, 75 minutes from Calais, down £74,000 to £354,600. “British vendors are moving elsewhere in France

and hoping to encourage visits by benefiting from the buyers' market," says VEF's Daniel Maskell.

But how do you know you are buying genuinely good value and not something with planning issues that might turn into a headache?

"The best way is to build a good working relationship with your agent," says Aris. "The agent is responsible by law in France for informing clients of any problems such as planning issues." Trisha Mason, VEF's director, also advises taking the best possible advice: "In times like this, unscrupulous agents will look out for desperate Brits in search of a bargain."

Among Italy's rolling Umbrian hills, Rancale – an abandoned hamlet whose old farm buildings, including a granary restored into two-storey homes starting from £240,000 – offers British buyers a different kind of bargain, by allowing them to buy in sterling. "We set the prices for Rancale in early 2008 when the euro was at 1.35 to the pound, and house prices in this region of Italy have not fallen, so sterling buyers in Rancale now are getting a 25 per cent discount," says Paul Belcher, of the London-based developer Ultissimo (020 3178 4975; [www.ultissimo.com](http://www.ultissimo.com) ).

There is a scarcity of newbuild property or one-off houses left to renovate in Umbria, so Rancale has a rarity value. Umbria is already the stuff of holiday home dreams, attracting buyers wanting to be near hilltop towns and Renaissance cities, but Rancale also has Ryanair flights into Perugia, a Trent Jones-designed golf course – another rarity in Italy – and a Four Seasons spa hotel is opening soon.

For those who would rather be alone on their Umbrian hilltop, Casa Barnetti is a four-bedroom stone farmhouse 25 kilometres (15 miles) from Perugia with a pool, tennis and riding facilities, down from £1.07 million to £794,000 through Knight Frank (0207 629 8171, [www.knightfrank.com](http://www.knightfrank.com) ).

"The British vendors are realistic in wanting to achieve a sale and conscious of the current exchange rate," says Knight Frank's Rupert Fawcett. "Now is a good time to buy; prices are competitive, but don't expect many forced sellers or absolute bargain prices."

Southern Spain is the place to find holiday homes at prices last seen in the mid-Nineties. But look for value and be wary of land ownership issues. At the Monte Mayor Golf & Country Club, a haven for the wealthy who want a rural Andalusian retreat near Marbella, the huge, four-bedroom Casa Colina, with an infinity pool looking down across hills to the sea, has been reduced by £377,000 to £1.03 million through Carrington Estates (0845 094 1168; [www.carrington-estates.com](http://www.carrington-estates.com) ). Or for more modest, but beautifully renovated, rural homes, Andalucia Exclusive (00 34 650 795416; [www.andalucia-exclusive.eu](http://www.andalucia-exclusive.eu) ) is selling a three-bedroom stone village house near Ronda, for £160,000.

But Barbara Wood from The Property Finders (0800 622 6745; [www.thepropertyfinders.com](http://www.thepropertyfinders.com) ) warns you won't find the best deals inland. "You can't wander around looking for distressed sales because the rural market wasn't funded by huge amounts of borrowing. It's 99 per cent Spanish-owned with no mortgages. Buying

on the coast works for British buyers at present as the huge discounts wipe out the disadvantage of sterling,” she says.

“A year ago, £400,000 would have bought you €550,000, which wasn’t enough to buy a penthouse. Now £400,000 will allow you to jump a rung from an ordinary two-bed flat to a penthouse beside the beach within walking distance of Puerto Banus. It’s the best it’s been for 15 years.”