



# Hot on the heel (and toe) of Italy

From a Sicilian mansion that played host to Tennessee Williams to the rolling hills of Puglia, PENNY CHURCHILL is entranced by Italy's rural south



The elegant Arts-and-Crafts-influenced Casa Cueni (below), which overlooks the bay of Naxos and the snow-covered Mount Etna (above), has played host to many famous guests, including Tennessee Williams and Caitlin Thomas, who wrote a book there



England. Horatio Nelson was granted the duchy of Bronte in eastern Sicily by the Bourbon king Ferdinand I, but died without ever seeing his estate.

In 1900, the artist Robert Kitson, the 27-year-old scion of a wealthy family of Yorkshire industrialists, came to Taormina, on the island's east coast, to recover from a bout of rheumatic fever. Captivated by its beauty, he decided to stay, and soon after bought a spectacular hillside site overlooking Taormina's historic centre, the sweeping bay of Naxos and the snow-covered slopes of Mount Etna. By 1908, Kitson had designed and built the timeless Casa Cueni, with its dramatic back-

drop of terraced gardens set into the hill; house and gardens were a mix of classical and Arts-and-Crafts styles. The huge main drawing room and library were furnished with antiques from Kitson's own collection, whereas the delightful small dining room was designed and decorated by his friend Sir Frank Brangwyn, a pupil of William Morris; the design of the gardens was clearly influenced by another Arts-and-Crafts icon, Sir Edwin Lutyens.

Following Kitson's sudden death in 1947, the Casa Cueni passed to his niece Daphne Phelps, who shortly afterwards set out for Sicily with the sole intention of selling a house she knew she couldn't

afford to keep. Fifty years later, she was still there, 'getting by' by opening the house and gardens to friends and paying guests, among them names such as Henry Faulkner, Bertrand Russell, Roald Dahl, Tennessee Williams, and Dylan Thomas's explosive widow, Caitlin. Her book *A House in Sicily* chronicles her Sicilian adventures. With little money available for major renovations, the Casa Cueni slid gently into a state of mild decay.

Following Daphne Phelps's death in 2005, the house passed to various members of her family, who, faced with the escalating costs of repair and maintenance, have decided to put this uniquely atmospheric house on the market, at a guide price of €3 million through Knight Frank (020-7629 8171) and their Sicilian associate, Thinksicily (020-7377 8518).

## THE PICK OF PUGLIA

With its tantalising mix of Arab, French, Greek, Norman and Spanish influences, Italy's rural south, or *mezzogiorno*, differs in character, landscape and history from the richer industrialised north. For centuries the forgotten half of what was once the kingdom of the two Sicilies, the *mezzogiorno* is fast becoming a Mecca for British sunshine-home buyers, courtesy of budget airlines such as Ryanair, which now flies regularly to Bari (Italy's fifth largest airport) and Brindisi on the east coast, and the Sicilian capital, Palermo, in the west.

Puglia, Italy's heel, is also Italy's bread basket, producing 70% of the country's olive oil, 80% of Europe's pasta and 10% of Europe's fine wines (the powerful Salentine reds are, literally, a knockout), and a huge proportion of Italy's fish is caught off the long Apulian coastline. Historically, the region was the gateway to Greece and the East, and the corridor whereby successive waves of invaders gained access to the north.

The spectacular coastline of the Salento peninsula in Puglia's extreme south—for centuries a Christian bastion against the infidel—is scattered with stout Renaissance castles and fortified farmhouses or *masserie*, built to protect the region from endless attacks by brigands and pirates. Now, along with the conical stone *trulli*, traditionally used to house farmworkers and shepherds, Puglia's gleaming limestone *masserie* have become the icons of a budding international property market, thanks to a handful of enterprising regional developers, among them Francesco Carlucci and Danilo Bertolli of Siena-based landscape properties SRL, founded in 2002.

Following the success of their Tuscan operation, the youthful entrepreneurs turned their attention to their native south, and, realising that classic *masserie* for restoration in Puglia were becoming

**'Concial stone trulli, used to house farmworkers and shepherds, and gleaming stone masserie have become the icons of an international property market'**



Enjoy the best of outdoor living in a bespoke *masserie* (above) near the town of Matera (below), recently voted Italy's safest city and the location for Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

ever rarer and more costly, they decided to create their own, following the traditional design of a one-storey stone building built around a central cloistered courtyard. Only traditional local materials would be used—either the creamy *pietra leccese* used to build the Baroque city of Lecce, dubbed 'the Florence of the south', or the more rustic *carparo*, a rougher, yellower stone. To ensure their craftsmen used only traditional techniques to work the stone, they set up a specialist academy to train their own stonemasons.

The first bespoke *masserie*, now nearing completion with several already sold to English buyers, are set in 500 acres of ancient olive groves near the small town of Martano, nine miles from Lecce, 10 minutes from the historic sea-port and golden beaches of Otranto, and less than an hour from Brindisi airport. The houses range in size from 2,000 sq ft upwards, with four or more en-suite bedrooms, a large central kitchen/living area and a swimming pool, surrounded by five acres of productive olive trees; prices range from €600,000 to €1.5 million.

Encouraged by the early success of its Martano scheme, Landscape Properties has launched a similar project in the hills around Francesco Carlucci's native town of Matera, in the little-known region of Basilicata, seven miles north of the Puglia border. Recently voted Italy's safest town, Matera is at once a thriving university town, and a UNESCO world heritage site, famous as the main location for Mel Gibson's epic *The Passion of the Christ*. Here, in a rolling landscape similar to that of Tuscany, buyers have the chance to create classic farmhouses of similar size and quality to those in Puglia, but set in five acres of land on the top of their very own hill. UK sales of both schemes are being handled by Knight Frank (020-7861 1058).

