

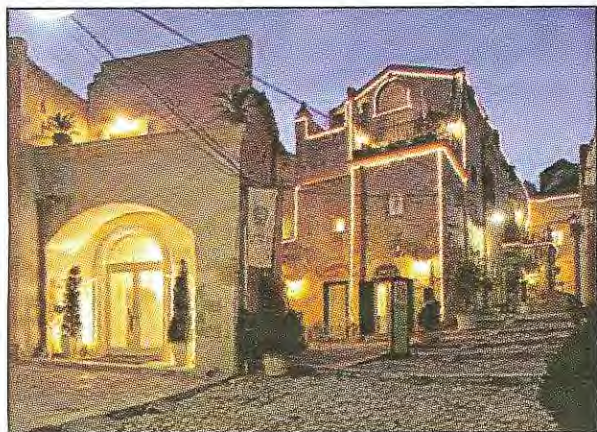
When the heat is on

Take a siesta in a farmhouse built in the creamy local limestone of Puglia, southern Italy's undiscovered region with beautiful Lecce as its capital, says **Cathy Hawker**

DOWN in the heel of Italy, in Puglia, past the famous conical trulli houses and the industrial smoke of Taranto and Bari, a pale, soft stone frames some of the country's most beautiful towns. This "pietra Leccese", the limestone of Lecce, was used for centuries to build cathedrals, churches — and masseria, or sturdy local farmhouses. These masseria are handsome buildings; some restored to become boutique hotels, some used as private homes and some left to crumble slowly in the hot, dry heat.

"Masseria are now increasingly popular with foreign buyers," says Gemma Knowles of GK Italian Property. "Italian buyers typically go for coastal apartments but British buyers look inland, though nowhere in Puglia is more than 20 miles from the sea." Masseria are large, usually very old, and often require a great deal of restoration.

Steep upkeep costs may deter some buyers but Landscape Properties offers a solution. It has sites in southern Puglia and neighbouring Basilicata with permission to build new stone farmhouses using centuries-old techniques.



La Casa di Lucio, a nine-room hotel set in rocks at Matera, is a favourite with British visitors (00 39 0835 312798)

Only 10 new homes a year

A new 2,000sq ft house with a swimming pool and five acres of grounds starts from a little below £400,000, with clients able to choose from several design styles and customised finishes.

"Unlike Tuscany, this part of the south of Italy was always a poor area with a shortage of farmhouses," says Francesco Carlucci of Landscape Properties.

The firm builds only 10 houses a year. Each project is single-storey and sits in five acres of land — which is a legal requirement with new rural homes — so in hot, flat Puglia you can own your own olive grove with up to 500 trees, or in hillier Basilicata you could overlook a lake and agricultural fields.

The skilful stonemasons will carve vaulted ceilings, large fireplaces and arched cloisters to provide shade from the fierce summer sun. Owners can add swimming pools, courtyards and gardens, creating individual properties with a simple, traditional beauty.

Jo and Paul Stephenson from central London bought a new masseria in Puglia in 2006. They spend three months there every summer; their four bedrooms soon filling up with visiting family and friends.

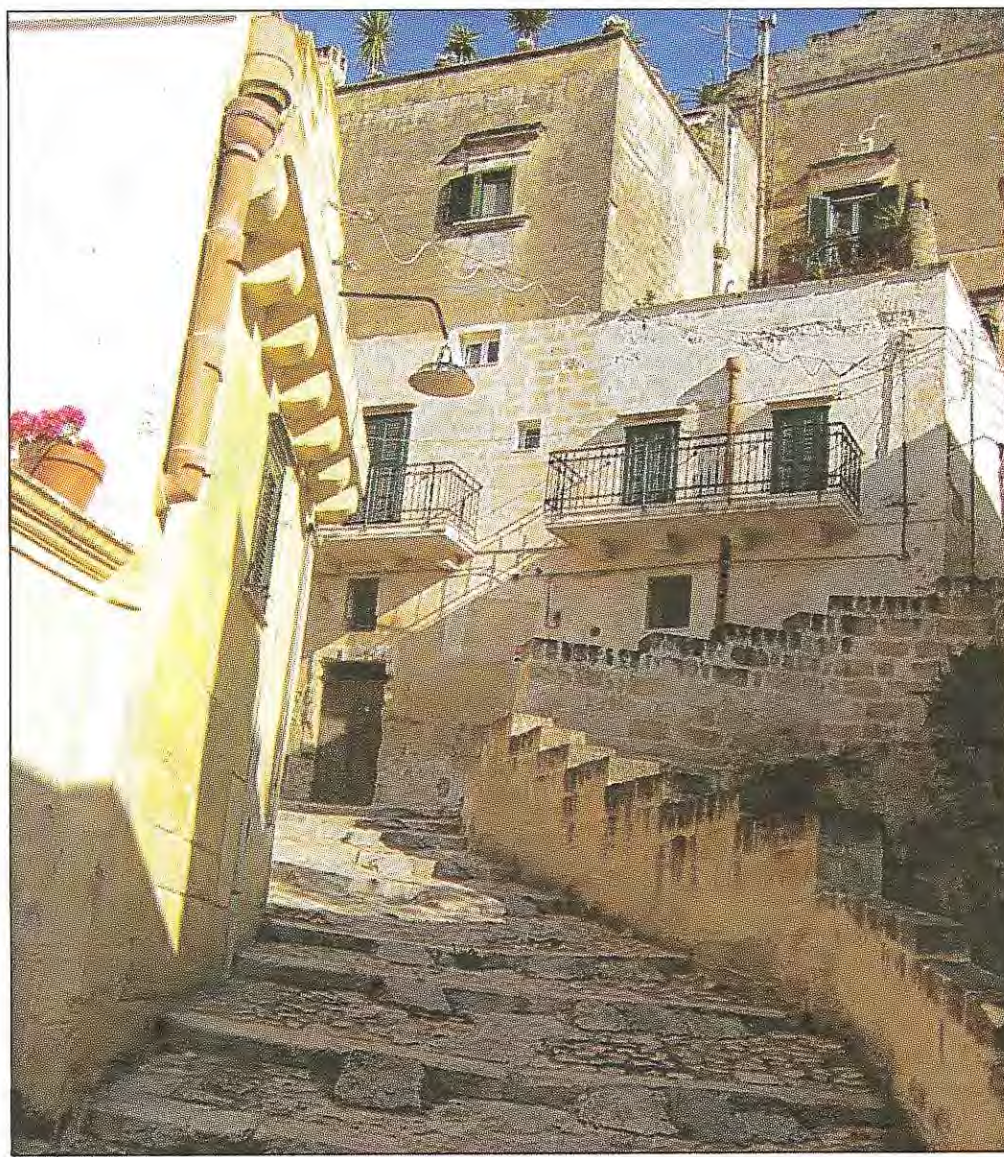
"We owned a house in Liguria, in northern Italy, but it

had become so built-up and crowded," says Jo. "A friend told us about Puglia and we fell for the region. The restaurants have great local cuisine, the beaches are safe and, though it is very hot in July and August, there is always a breeze. The people are so much more unspoilt by tourism and crime levels are low. But getting

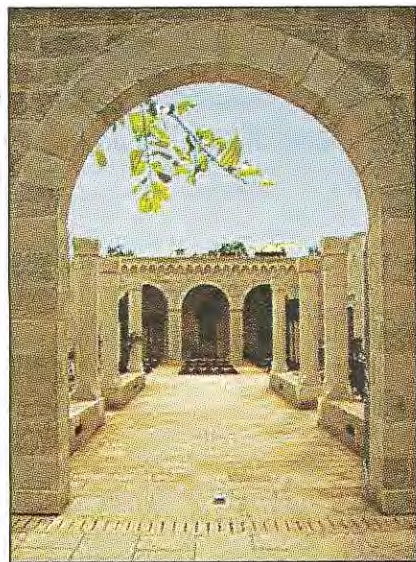
'The beaches are safe and, though it is hot in July and August, there's always a breeze'

anything done can be frustrating, and you certainly don't find English spoken very widely here."

Italian visitors come in the peak summer months, sunbathing on the sandy beaches (which are not always the cleanest in Italy) and enjoying the seafood and local wines. However, for nine months of the year this is a



In southern Puglia, the town of Matera is built in the pale "pietra Leccese" limestone so distinctive of the region



From £395,000: new masserias (above) built in local pietra Leccese stone, by Landscape Properties Group. Sold through Knight Frank (020 7629 8171)



£197,500: a three-bedroom villa in six acres with a two-bedroom "trulli" (above) and tennis court. Call 01322 660988

When only a beach will do

The bay of Gallipoli in southern Italy's Puglia region, near the regional capital, Lecce. Italian visitors flock here for three months of the year, attracted by its bright sea, clean beaches and robust local peasant cuisine. British homebuyers look further inland for homes in villages unspoilt by tourism



very quiet area, and not for those seeking nightlife or a sophisticated environment.

"We don't at the moment cater for an international market," admits Andrea Nuzzo from Lecce Tourist Office. "Standards can be variable but we are learning. Probably our best asset is that we remain undiscovered."

For those in need of culture, Lecce, the provincial capital, is stuffed with baroque architecture, narrow streets lined with bookshops and art galleries and restaurant-filled squares, perfect for watching the passeggiata — the evening promenade. A two-bedroom city-centre flat there costs from £206,000.

Contacts:

Landscape Properties Group (www.dreamhomesinpuglia.com), or Knight Frank (020 7629 8171; www.knightfrank.com); and GK Italian Property (020 7241 3627; www.gkitalianproperty.com). For Salento Time Tourist Office, visit www.salentotime.it.

For more on Puglia, see page 30



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