



Definitely not down at heel

Puglia's stone farmhouses are half the price of similar Tuscan properties, reports Nicola Venning

There are many reasons to visit the heel of Italy's boot – the flat, rural region that is located between the Adriatic and the Ionian seas known as Puglia. But none are as enticing as its hundreds of traditional Italian stone farmhouses, called *masseria*.

"I love the stone and the way they are built", says Bernie Huepfl, a London financier who spent two years looking for a holiday home in the region with his wife Emma. "Everything is handmade: the corncicing, the fireplaces. The walls are half a metre thick".

The area, particularly northern Puglia around Alberobello, is well known for its *trulli* – round homes with cone shaped roofs, but Huepfl, who grew up with traditional stone-walled farmhouses in his native Austria, was intent on finding a similar property for his second home.

Though the market for standard properties has slowed – "it's quite flat at the moment," says Kamran Mishahi of the Puglia estate agency – it is a different story for period homes at the upper end.

"Demand [for *masseria*] is outstripping supply", says Nigel Wilson, who runs Puglia Estates, a company that specialises in restoring *masseria* and 16th century palazzos. He estimates that prices for these traditional homes have doubled in the past three years.

"The Salentine Peninsula [in Puglia], south of Lecce, is the bit that has really

taken off," says Wilson, "because of the beaches and the historic city centres." A one-bedroom apartment in a converted palazzo would, Wilson estimates, start from €175,000. A restored four- or five-bedroom *masseria* with two acres start from €800,000.

Masseria are traditional one-storey farmhouses built around a courtyard with cloisters. Roman in style, they are reminiscent of square colonnaded fortress homes. Nowadays, workers' rooms have been turned into living rooms with vaulted round stone ceilings and impressive handmade fireplaces; stables are bedrooms with stylish ensuite bathrooms and courtyards tinkle with fountains shadowed by fragrant lemon trees.

Frustrated by the lack of supply and the size of some of the *masseria* (which are often turned into hotels), the Huepfls paid €720,000 to have theirs built from local *pietra leccese*, (white limestone) and *carparo* (honey limestone). Their elegant home, from Landscape Properties, is almost finished.

Achieving this simplicity was not easy. "There were only about 50 stone masons left in the area," says Francesco Carlucci, managing director of Landscape Properties. Highly skilled 70-year-old masons have been brought out of retirement to carve the stone and train up younger craftsmen.

The Huepfl's spacious, airy five-bedroom *masseria* is set in five acres of olive trees. The beach, where you cannot build as planning

regulations are tight, is about 6km away. The village of Martano is five minutes' drive and Lecce, renowned for its Greek architecture (Greek is spoken here alongside Italian) is 25 minutes' drive away.

Carlucci, who is also building villas in the hillside outside the city of Matera, is confident that over the next five years the *masseria* will catch up with Tuscan prices.

"Property in Puglia is half the price of southern Tuscany," says Harry Lewis, international director at UK estate agency Savills. Landscape Properties is selling *masseria* from €500,000 to €1m. By comparison, a two-bedroom apartment in nearby Otranto would start from about €450,000.

Puglia is one of the few areas in Italy where

Traditional Alberobello is well known for its round homes with cone shaped roofs

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you will not hear another English voice, although this is changing now budget airlines are flying into Brindisi (45 minutes away) and Bari (two hours away). Once fought over by Normans and Saracens, this tip of southern Italy lures holidaying Italians in droves. "It is more about beaches, relaxation, good food and wine, rather than culture," says Rupert Fawcett, who runs UK estate agency Knight Frank's Italian department.

Though it lacks the cultural icons of Florence, Rome or Pisa, this area, particularly the Salentine peninsula, compensates with wild, flat countryside, a laid-back friendly lifestyle and good food.

British actress Helen Mirren has bought a castle in Tiggiano; TV presenter Amanda Lamb (of the UK's *A Place in the Sun*) has an apartment in Nardo and Lord MacAlpine and his wife Athena run a boutique hotel south of Lecce in Marittima di Diso. In general, buyers range from 35-year-olds with young families to 65-year-old retirees.

"The Salentine Peninsula gets very quiet in the winter," says Mirshahi, who suggests that buying further north along the Adriatic coast between the two airports would be more convenient. "You can get a nice 20-year-old villa with an acre of land in pretty Fasano (half way between Brindisi and Bari) for €250,000 to €300,000," he says. Wherever you choose, if you opt to restore your own *masseria*, tread carefully.

Before they moved to Puglia seven years ago, Venice Allan and Darren Howat bought an old tobacco barn on the Salentine Peninsula that they converted while still living in London. "It was challenging, not just linguistically but culturally. We hired a builder and some of the work was fine, some was not," says Venice, who now runs a project management agency, We Love Salento, with her husband, giving advice to other buyers.

One option is to hire a local, recommended architect who can oversee the conversion for you. "They get the job done," says Mirshahi, "but a word of warning – if the contract states one year, expect two. That's just the way it is here."

Details

Estate agencies

Apulia, tel: +44 (0)208-858 9258, www.Apulia.co.uk

Puglia Estates, www.pugliaestates.com

Knight Frank, tel: +44(0)207-629 8171 www.knightfrank.com

Developers

Landscape Properties, tel: +39 577-28 1455

www.landscapeproperties.com

Savills, tel: +44 (0)207-016 3740, www.savills.co.uk

