

Essentis Properties

The Sunday Telegraph

26 July 2015

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Property

Back
to the
stone age

A small Italian village is setting the standard for rustic living, says *Andrea Watson*

Some of Hollywood's top names have been credited with creating a mini property boom in a southern Italian town that was once condemned as uninhabitable.

Matera, one of the most ancient cities in the world, and its cave houses, has become the star location in the current remake of *Ben Hur* starring Morgan Freeman and Jack Huston.

Over the centuries, the caves have been inhabited by troglodyte communities and monastic orders such as the Benedictines, but in the Fifties many inhabitants were

forcibly driven from their cave homes due to repeated outbreaks of cholera.

All that has changed. The caves are being turned into smart hotels and b&b's and, following a drive by the town council, Matera has now won the coveted title of European City of Culture 2019, ahead of Siena and Pisa.

Demand is rising. Estate agents,



who would once have been more than happy to receive €30,000 (£21,000) for an inhabitable cavern, are ramping up prices, as the caves become fashionable places to enjoy a short break. A room offering not much more than a bed and tiny en suite costs from £80-£100 a night, but tourists who have stayed at the b&b's rave about their romanticism with their rustic vaulted ceilings and no Wi-Fi.

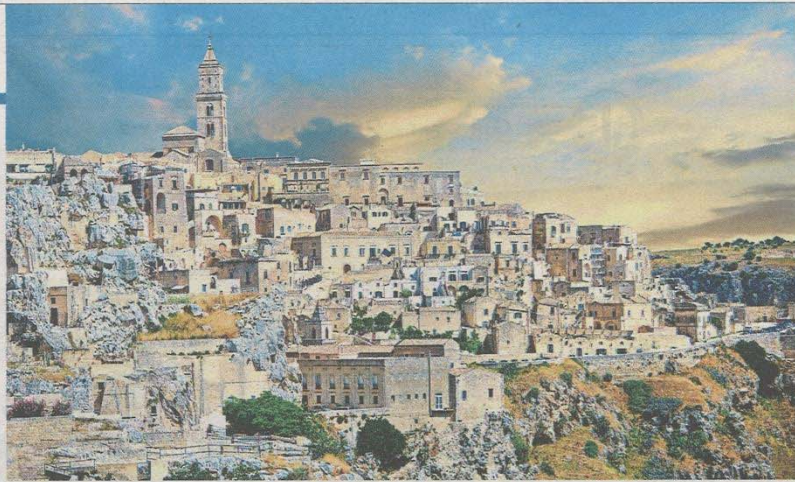
Local developer Francesco Carlucci, CEO of the Essentis Group (essentisproperties.com), has carved a niche market from this yearning for the simple life. He is building a collection of stone

Going underground: Matera's cave dwellings, above, provided inspiration for new villas in the surrounding area

villas similar to the old *masserie* or fortified houses that hark back to Roman/Moorish times in the countryside around Matera and southwards towards Lecce.

To be fair, they are more palatial than paleo, but they do share one major feature with the caves: their vaulted ceilings, a feature of which Carlucci is inordinately proud.

Each bespoke *masseria* is made from locally quarried stone by stonemasons employing traditional techniques that were dying out until Essentis stepped in. Every



stone is hand carved, and so every villa is unique.

"I launched the company in 2008 at the height of the crisis and since then our prices have tripled." Set, as he puts it, "in a sea of olive trees, in the middle of nowhere, but next to everything", the villas have found favour among the well heeled.

Built to order in 18 months, 27 of the first group of 30 homes near Lecce are sold.

On the whole, a *masseria* on 10 acres costs €3 million (£2.12 million), on 15 acres €4.5 million and on 20 acres €6 million. *Masseria degli ulivi*, pictured top right, comes with 370 acres and plenty of renovation work to keep a buyer busy. It is on the market for €3.5 million through Essentis. A fully restored version, near Puglia with four double bedrooms, swimming pool, and all furniture included costs €1.35 million.

Their upkeep costs from €5,000 per month, including maintenance of the olive groves, from which you will receive a small amount of olive oil. A well-deserved extra at these prices.