

Essentis Properties

The Sunday Times - Home

28 September 2015

HOME

52 / OVERSEAS

SUNDAY TIMES DIGITAL
Get a bird's-eye view of the abandoned village on our tablet edition, or at thesundaytimes.co.uk/homevideo

TIMES+
To celebrate the release of *A Walk in the Woods*, we're giving you the chance to win an Appalachian Trail trip with Grand American Adventures. To enter, visit mytimesplus.co.uk

GETAWAYS OF THE WEEK



\$5.75m

SETTLE IN

Next door to two luxury hotels on the ritzy Platinum Coast (Coral Reef Club and the Sandpiper), Settlers Barbados is a new "elite villa community" of 12 beachfront homes, with sleek architecture and private pools. This three-storey home has four bedrooms, 4,800 sq ft of interior space and 1,200 sq ft outside. Owners can use the hotel amenities, and the rum bars and restaurants of Huletown are a short walk away.

00 1 246 230 3055, settlersbarbados.com

€1.32m

LANGUID LANGUEDOC

When is a gîte not a gîte? When it's a superglam complex just a stone's throw from the beach in the winemaking village of Fitou, north of Perpignan. A one-bedroom main house and three separate one-bedroom "suites" are dotted around the property, which has a curving infinity pool and has been run as a boutique hotel. Our advice? Ditch the guests and party all year with family and friends.

0870 011 5151, frenchestateagents.com

€725,000

TOP HOLE

This traditional Mallorcan three-bedroom villa is on the Santa Ponsa golf course, but if birdies and bogeys mean nothing to you, there are plenty of other distractions. It's in the southwest of the island, so the beaches are fab, and you'll find designer boutiques and eateries in the superyacht marina at Port Adriano. Palma airport is a 25-minute drive away; many airlines offer year-round services to Mallorca, so it's an ideal weekend.

00 34 971 699 063, engelvoelkers.com

The full monte

Getty Images/Alamy, Getty

There's only one way in to Poggio Santa Cecilia: drive up the tree-lined track and step through the arched gateway in the high stone wall that surrounds the Tuscan hilltop borgo. A tranquil, sun-warmed silence pervades the deserted village, which first appears in historic records in 1198, and as the scent of the wild mint growing between the cobbles is released by my tread, the ghosts of the past begin to reveal themselves.

Local legend has it that the Florentine poet Dante Alighieri was in the army that besieged the unfortunate community in the 13th century, during the endless tussle for Tuscan supremacy between Siena, 15 miles to the west, and Florence, 40 miles

Deserted for decades, this hilltop village in Tuscany is now on sale for £30m, with 50 houses and 1,700 acres — but only as a job lot, all or nothing. By **Karen Robinson**

north. Little of the village is still medieval, although, until 50 years ago, the style of building and the way of life had remained remarkably unchanged for centuries.

Fabio Menegoli, who runs a metal-roofing company in Verona, 200 miles away, is my host, representing his "gruppo di amici" — a group of five friends — who between them own the borgo. He guides me through the narrow streets, small piazzas and overgrown gardens, pointing out the sturdy travertine corner stones on

the red-brick houses and workshops.

About 200 people used to live and work here, farming the surrounding land. As well as the houses and animal byres, laid out in the three parallel streets of the original medieval plan, there's a church, an echoing church-like grain store, a carpenter's workshop and a blacksmith's, still blackened from the fire that heated the forge. The buildings — about 50 in all, though nobody has done a definitive reckoning — have been maintained in a

sound, weatherproof state by Fabio and his fellow shareholders, while sturdy locks on the gate and a security system keep them safe from vandals.

Poggio Santa Cecilia could probably remain like this indefinitely, a quiet monument to a lost way of life perched above the rolling Tuscan countryside, with spectacular views in every direction over fields, vineyards and orchards to distant mountains: in winter, Monte Amiata, an ancient volcano, is covered in snow. But Fabio and his group want to sell it.

He and his fellow owners are getting too old, he says. (He's a sprightly 81.) "I suffer that I can't do what's needed, so I will feel happy if someone takes it and does the right things. It still moves me to be in the borgo — so it must go to the right person, someone who appreciates its beauty as well as its potential."

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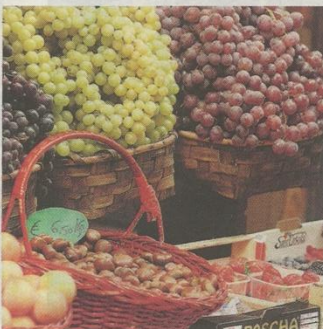
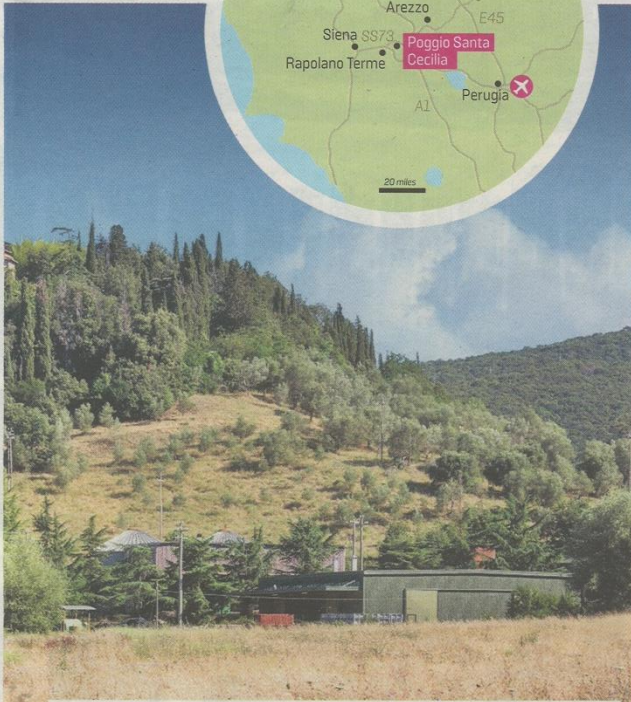
Lost world
Poggio Santa Cecilia, once home to 200 people, is 15 miles from Siena, home of the Palio, below



It's a quiet monument to a lost way of life, perched above the rolling Tuscan countryside, with spectacular views in every direction

Earlier this year, they started the ball rolling with the local authorities in nearby Rapolano Terme, submitting plans that outline options for future use, including homes, a hotel and a cultural centre. They have also restored the olive press "in the correct style", Fabio says, reroofing it in traditional red tiles and fixing the stone arches of the colonnade. Still, he admits that transforming the whole village "will be an enormous work".

The centrepiece of the village is the summer residence of its former aristocratic owners, the counts of Buoinsegna: a magnificent villa, completed about 100 years ago on the site of the original castle. Even in its abandoned state, it remains eloquently suggestive of the grace and ease of upper-class life, with grand salons, an orangery and formal "English" gardens. Old copies of *Diana*, a magazine about hunting, are still stacked on the bookcases, sepia images of family members stare down from the walls and, in the warren of cellars, wine barrels the size of garden sheds sit silently in the musty gloom. Perhaps in acknowledgment of Dante's association with Santa Cecilia, there's a quotation from *The Divine Comedy* carved around the monumental wooden sideboard in the dining room: Ulysses, banished to hell, is telling the diners to follow the path of virtue. The Buoinsegna family managed, over several centuries, to be almost heroically boring, making absolutely no impression on wider Italian life: not in politics, the church, the military, industry, banking or the arts. A local



The estate is in the heart of Chianti. The buildings have been maintained in a sound and weatherproof state, but full restoration will be a serious undertaking



→ historian, Doriano Mazzini, has made a detailed study of the archive, which he pronounces "interesting but marginal", though he fills me in on the one event that brought the struggle for national unification into the heart of the community.

One of the Buoninsegni counts, Pietro Leopoldo, was a friend of the revolutionary hero Giuseppe Garibaldi – who, in 1847, stayed in the village for several days after taking the waters at the spa in Rapolano for his bad leg. A tiny piazza was duly named in his honour.

Generally, however, life just followed the seasons in the borgo under the *mezzadria* system, with generation after generation of peasants working the Buoninsegni lands and handing over an increasing proportion of the produce. This sharecropping arrangement became unsustainable following the Second World War, as the peasants deserted agrarian grind for paid work in the travertine quarries of Rapolano or the industrial cities of northern Italy.

The surviving Buoninsegni sold up, and by the 1970s had moved away, leaving Fabio and his associates to begin acquiring their estates. They started by buying the surrounding farmland, intending to raise organic veal cattle, and finally ended up with about 1,700 acres in the heart of Tuscany – a mini fiefdom crowned by the borgo.

And now they want to sell it all. For the €40m (£29.5m) asking price, you get not just the village, but 1,200 acres of woodland, two lakes, 23 acres of fruit trees – plums and apples – 55 acres of vineyards growing Chianti Colli Senesi DOCG grapes, 26 acres of olive groves, 270 acres of irrigated arable land, roads, uncultivated land, peripheral land, farm buildings and so on.

Fabio admits that the farming, all organic, is just ticking over, "but someone else could make it profitable. And the grapes are of high quality. At the moment, other winemakers buy them to improve their vineyard, but you could make wine here. If someone with a passion took this farm in hand, they could create a thriving business."

Just to complete the picture, there are farmhouses. About 20 of them, each one looking like a postcard of the quintessential Tuscan scene – bathed in golden light and enfolded in the typical landscape of open fields, lush forests and cypress trees.

Four-square, with a colonnaded front, and often topped by a pigeon loft, they are stately, solid and imposing. And large, ranging from about 3,800 sq ft to more than 10,000 sq ft of

potential living space. These typical houses are known as *leopoldine*, named for a 16th-century grand duke of Tuscany who devised the style to improve his workers' conditions. Despite their grand appearance, they are actually peasant homes, more abandoned relics of the *mezzadria*. The beasts lived downstairs, the people above, and landowners continued to build them into the 19th century.

These days, restored *leopoldine* farmhouses make magnificent country mansions, though taking on the job lot that the Poggio Santa Cecilia estate offers – all in various states of dilapidation – is several steps beyond most people's ambitions. Perhaps Fabio and his chums would sell them off one at a time? After all, Casale Monticello, the "medium size" farmhouse and outbuildings he has restored on the edge of the estate, turning them into eight spacious independent units with underground parking and a pool, cost €4.3m to do up (and is for sale separately for €6m).

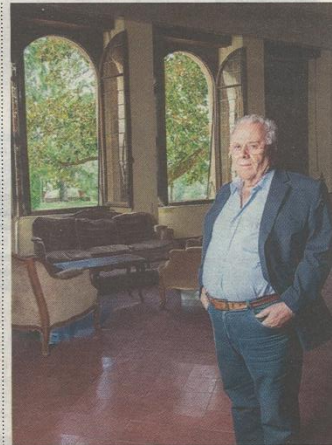
But no, the estate is, for him, indivisible. "What we've done is keep this property together without fracturing it. So it is unique, and as it is, it has more value. If I split it up, it would lose its appeal. I know single houses are tempting to British buyers, but when you have the entire estate, you can control it. You could create a university campus, you could put in a golf course..." And, he adds, there are considerable tax advantages for both seller and buyer if the estate remains in one piece.

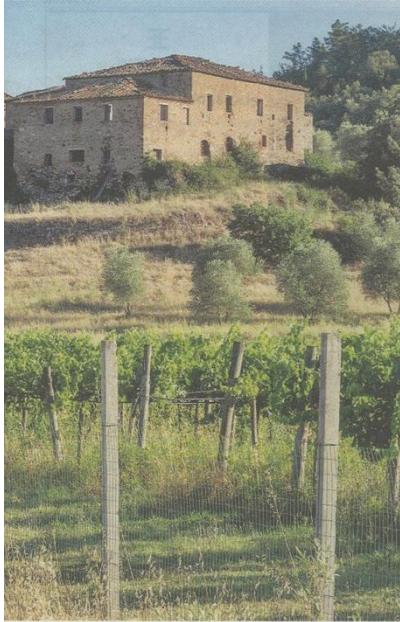
So who's likely to come along with €40m and become

Ripe for a change The surrounding estate includes 55 acres of Chianti vines. Below, Piazza del Duomo, Siena



"What we've done is keep this property together without fracturing it. It is unique – if I split it up, it would lose its appeal"





signore of a piece of the most beautiful landscape in Europe, and owner of possibly the biggest single restoration project on the Continent? Francesco Carlucci, who is marketing the estate through his development company, Essentis Properties, reckons it would be ideal for "a superwealthy family", who could create their main residence in the borgo and have a farmhouse for each guest. "Or it might suit a hotel group," he adds.

Here's an opportunity to own not simply a property in Italy — and with that comes the responsibility to respect its heritage and give it a future. After the aristocratic Buoninsegni, and the self-made man Fabio and his fellow businessmen, who will fit the bill as its next custodian?

■ The estate is for sale through Essentis Properties; 0782 571 7738, essentisproperties.com

Below left, Fabio Menegoli, one of the five owners of Poggio Santa Cecilia



GALLE, SRI LANKA

What's the pull? On the southern tip of Sri Lanka, Galle is a fortified colonial town where the temperature always hovers at a balmy 30C. The air is filled with the aroma of tropical spices and the salty tang of the sea, and the town itself is attractive, with a fine collection of Dutch colonial buildings. It has become increasingly arty — especially around Galle Fort, a Unesco World Heritage Site — with lots of cafes and boutiques.

Healthcare is good, and living here is cheap if you're happy to stick to local food and travel by tuk-tuk. Entertainment is largely free — cycling through paddy fields to surf in the palm-fringed Indian Ocean, gazing at the jaw-dropping sunsets, that sort of thing.

Where to live Until 2011, Galle was a three- or four-hour drive from the capital, Colombo, but the journey time was cut to an hour when the Chinese built an expressway. The road has contributed to a boom in property investment, speeding up recovery from the 2004 tsunami and the civil war that ended in 2009.

Most British owners are looking for rental potential, and many build a place for themselves. There's a lot to be said for living a little way inland, where your garden will come dripping with coconuts, jackfruit, breadfruit and mangos, accessorised with lizards, monkeys and exotic birds.

The cost of living Prime beachfront land in Galle

has trebled in value since 2009, with the cost per perch (about 270 sq ft) rising from US\$2,500 to \$7,500 (£4,900). Prime inland plots have risen from \$350 per perch to \$2,000 over the same period. There has been little change in the past 12 months, except for truly prime sites, for which prices continue to increase by as much as 20% a year.

The cost of a beachfront villa ranges from £250,000 to more than £3m. A renovated Dutch-period

property in Galle Fort would start at about \$100,000 a perch — equivalent to £240 a sq ft.

There has been much uncertainty about rules on foreign ownership in Sri Lanka, but the new government has indicated that it will simplify them. It's a good idea to use two independent lawyers who understand the land laws and will be thorough in checking title deeds.

What the locals say

Bureaucracy is a nightmare and any sort of form-filling can take for ever.

Who to call Lanka Real Estate (00 94 777 235775, lankarealestate.com); Pearl Properties (00 94 91 222 7020, pearlsrilanka.com).

Cally Law

