

Make a Marche in a hidden corner of Italy

Dubbed the new Tuscany by some observers, the Adriatic region of Marche is ripe for the perusal, but beware the costs of renovation, writes **Diarmaid Condon**

Marche is a spectacularly pretty, and much under-publicised, part of Italy. It has been dubbed the new Tuscany, and there are undeniable similarities in the scenic, undulating countryside. No direct flights exist from Ireland, so you'll need to travel to Ancona or Pescara via Stansted or another British airport, but it is well worth the effort.

Located geographically directly north of Rome, Marche does not carry the cachet of Tuscany, Umbria or Lombardy, but it does offer access to the Adriatic coastline, rolling hills running from the Apennines and vineyard-dotted countryside. It is also home to gems like Conero Regional Park and the ancient town of Ascoli Piceno, with its narrow cobbled streets and surfeit of travertine piazzas.

There is a proliferation of old properties in Italy, and new planning can be difficult to obtain so renovating is often a natural route to ownership of a property here. Renovation also seems to be something of a fascination with overseas buyers. This is a little counter-in-



Clockwise from above: the region of Marche, located north of Rome, contains a slew of old properties that can be picked up for a song - if you don't mind a spot of renovation into the bargain

tuitive because, as you can imagine, running a renovation project from overseas is remarkably difficult. Those who have attempted it confirm this and generally advise against it, but there's no talking to some people.

I spoke with one English couple who successfully completed a renovation outside Ascoli Piceno which they described as "a royal pain". They did it with the assistance of an English-speaking agent, Jane Smith of Magic Marche, without whom they said it could not have been completed. It is normally impossible to live on-site and, being in a different country, it is necessary to have someone who can show up at short notice.

Annalisa Angellotti is a director of Italian property portal Gate-Away.com, a rapidly expanding

Italian property portal set up some years ago by a team of Italians formerly with a British-based portal. The site includes a very worthwhile guide to buying Italian property.

Angellotti said that one-fifth of Gate-Away.com searches involve "renovation", and that this increases to almost a quarter of searches from Ireland. Tuscany has experienced a 'renovation revolution' for many years now, being referred to as 'Chianti-shire' in certain circles. It is also now very expensive; so eyes, and wallets, are being diverted to Marche as a viable alternative.

Properties in need of TLC for sale in Marche range in price from under €20,000 for a detached town-house in Matelica to a crumbling palace for sale in Jesifor €1.9 million. Don't be under

any illusions, there are thousands of vacant properties littering the Italian countryside as economic imperatives drive their occupants to the main cities for employment. Many are very remote and some will never be candidates for renovation.

For those of you hell-bent on just such a life-affirming journey, here are some tips from Simone Rossi, another director of Gate-Away.com. He said renovating a house in Italy can take up to two years and, make no mistake, it will probably be an extremely rough ride.

As a very general rule of thumb, you can expect to pay between €900 and €1,250 per square metre for a house renovation in this region. If you watch Grand Designs or Room to Improve, you will be aware that renovation costs can be

an extremely fluid moving target. Old properties constantly throw up unforeseen and expensive challenges. Rossi said hiring a professional to comply with regulations is a necessity, and often mandatory. Always ask for references and different quotations.

You'll need to hire a "geometra" (surveyor) or architect to draw up plans. It typically takes three to five months for approval from the commune (town hall). Many properties in Marche are "listed", and your contractor will need to contact the Ministry of Culture (Belle Arti) for guidelines. Doors and windows, for example, will need to maintain their original dimensions. A contractor experienced in working with restoration of historic finishes, such as frescoes, is highly recommended.

It will also be necessary to analyse existing materials and their state of degradation. At this point Rossi advises receipt of a detailed estimate of costs and timing from the contractor. If you decide to proceed, a written contract to define all works to be carried out, with associated costs, is critical.

Available properties

House Cristina is a 128 square metre, two-bedroom country house over two floors on two hectares in Amandola, Fermo province. It has a stone portico with fantastic views to the Sibillini mountains. Something of a blank canvas, it has stairs inside, but not much else. It is eight kilometres from the closest town and 50km from the sea. The asking price, before restoration, is €95,000.

There is a three-bed, 200 square metre village house with a garden in Roccafluvione. It has an elevated position with excellent valley and mountain views. It is five kilometres to the nearest large town and 25km from the sea. The asking price is €59,000.

If you're not mad enough to wish to do all this yourself, you could consider a two-level apartment within a sympathetically renovated monastery in the hilltop town of Ripatransone. This 145 square metre, two-bed unit is 12km from the beach and 30km from a ski resort. It has under-floor heating, double-glazing and a safety door. The building has elevators and private parking. The unit is priced at €280,000.

All properties are available to see at Gate-Away.com.