

Why Puglia trumps Tuscany \227 and where to buy |

Puglia, Italy's sun-drenched heel, has long been a well-kept secret. Jutting into the translucent turquoise waters of the Adriatic and Ionian seas, it is a region of breathtaking seascapes and silvery carpets of olive groves, of whitewashed hilltop towns and locals hawking plump vine-ripened tomatoes and homemade olive oil in the noisy bustle of the weekly markets. Helen Mirren owns a home here, and the area looks set to gain a new swathe of converts after the chick-flick *Walking on Sunshine* an unashamed rip-off of *Mamma Mia!*, but set in Puglia and starring Greg Wise is released later this month. Regardless of the film's reception and it may not get rave reviews critics will find it hard not to be moved by the backdrop: exuberant scenes set among the haphazard alleyways of Lecce showcase the baroque splendour of the city's creamy limestone streets, while carefree Vespa excursions start in the olive groves and end at beach bars at the furthest tip of the rugged Salentine peninsula. Of course, not all of Puglia is so photogenic many of the farming areas are flat and truly uninspiring but the region is starting to attract a more cosmopolitan strain of property buyer. We have growing interest from France, Scandinavia, Belgium and Germany, says Diego Moretto, owner of Oikos Immobiliare, in Brindisi province. Britons are also homing in on the area. Inquiries from this country for Puglian homes on the Italian property portal [Gate-Away.com](#) increased by 117% in 2013, seeing the region overtake Liguria as the second-most popular in Italy (after Tuscany), with the affordability of homes a big part of the appeal. Puglia is the best part of Italy to get a property with some land on a budget, says Linda Travella, director of the Italian property specialist Casa Travella. You can get a lovely villa around Ostuni with three bedrooms and two bathrooms, set within several acres of olive groves, from 300,000 [£243,000]. For one that needs updating, look 30km inland, perhaps around Oria a delightful little historic town of cobbled streets with a lively market. There you can pick up doer-uppers for 100,000. Prices have fallen in Puglia since 2008 as they have across Italy and people are much more likely to take offers now. Travella points out that property prices in Puglia are, broadly speaking, usually 20% to 25% lower than those in Tuscany and Umbria. Five years ago, Melissa Byrne, 40, and her husband, Blaise, 42, from Richmond, southwest London, bought a modern threebedroom holiday home in two acres near Ostuni, which they share with their children, Gabriel, 8, and Luca, 5. They paid 140,000. Ostuni is one of Puglia's prettiest towns, a huddle of white limestone homes perched on a high ridge above the sea. It has two airports Bari and Brindisi within an hour's drive or less, and is close to many desirable locations: Martina Franca, Cisternino, Locorotondo and Polignano a Mare. After property hunting in Tuscany initially, we decided we wanted to be by the sea, and loved the Greek vibe of southern Puglia, says Byrne, who works in PR. It has a character unlike anywhere else in Italy, and we



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Italy's sun-drenched heel is cheaper, warmer and less touristy than the traditional favourite, with turquoise waters and a hint of Greece about it

Liz Rowlinson Published: 1 June 2014

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enjoy the relaxed atmosphere. Byrne and her family head to the harbour town of Monopoli for shopping or restaurants, and also frequent the beach shacks at Torre Carne that sell fresh ricci (sea urchins) as featured on Rick Stein's BBC series. They are now seeking a property in the same area with less land to look after, so are selling up for 160,000 (01322 660988, casatravella.com). So what else is on offer in Puglia? For traditionalists there is, of course, a trullo, one of the dry-stone huts with conical roofs for which the Itria Valley is famous. You can buy a villa in any country, but only here do you get trulli, says Gabriella Dragone, owner of Agenzia dei Trulli, based in Alberobello. Nobody comes to me asking for apartments near the beach, or town houses they come for the trulli, or a masseria [fortified farmhouse] if they can afford one. Dragone is selling masserie to renovate from 350,000; for a restored property, you are looking at 1.5m-2.5m, sometimes more. For trulli, prices start at 40,000 for a two-room fixer-upper. I often sell partially restored trulli for about 140,000-170,000, and help the buyers put their own stamp on them, so the overall budget is 200,000-250,000, Dragone adds. Susan Gardner, from Glasgow, owns two trulli in Martina Franca a town of extravagant sandy-coloured baroque facades that is famed for its myriad festivals, notably its summer opera extravaganza and manages the summer rentals for eight more (trullimagical.com). I bought my first trullo a two-bedder for 92,000 10 years ago, says Gardner, 45, a former paramedic. I did it up it's worth about 280,000 now and, five years ago, bought another to live in myself. It has three bedrooms and two bathrooms, plus two acres of land, and cost 180,000. It's now worth 400,000. Gardner says that two-bedroom trulli rent out for 2,000 a week in July and August. It is quiet out of season, although I love being here in November, when it's still warm enough to be outside and cosy with a log fire within. The southernmost province of Lecce is a slightly different proposition from the north: a few degrees warmer, it is more Greek in ambience and a strong Moorish thread is reflected in the design of the rural masserie, which feature low-slung buildings around a central courtyard. Many masserie have been in local families for generations, but since a new annual property tax on them was introduced in 2013, some owners are selling up. The IUC tax (which includes three different parts, including IMU property tax, as well as garbage and communal services taxes) applies to all sorts of properties, but, put simply, masserie estates tend to work out especially expensive because of their size. IMU tax is paid only by nonresidents that is, second-homers. With an extra 2,000 a year to pay on their second homes, some Italian owners can't afford to run them, Oikos's Moretto says. For overseas buyers who are willing to pay the annual taxes, there are good margins to negotiate for cash purchasers in some cases, I've seen price reductions of 50%. When buying an old property in Puglia, it is essential to check that the title deed documentation is up to date. Permissions for renovations, such as the addition of an extra bathroom, might not be included, so get your lawyer to check this and make sure you add in your preliminary contract a clause that ensures all permissions are updated by completion. A simpler process, however, is designing your own from scratch. Francesco Carlucci, chief executive of the developer Essentis Properties, has cornered the market in new-build luxury masserie in Puglia he has now completed 25 properties since 2007. Handcrafted stone masserie go for 1.5m to 10m, with a mix of international buyers queuing up for this hassle-free and bespoke offering (07825 717758, www.essentisproperties.com). High-profile people choose Puglia for the simple, low-key existence that they can no longer enjoy in Tuscany, which has become so glossy it's like a film set, Carlucci says. That said, he admits that Puglia has become more sophisticated, with growing numbers of five-star hotels and Ibiza-type beach clubs, such as La Dolce Riva, in Otranto, and the Punta della Suina, in Gallipoli. A shortage of high-end rental properties ensures that masserie such as the ones built by Essentis command hefty lettings rates of up to 19,000 a week. A 5m property in Tuscany typically makes less than 50% of the income of a 2m property in Puglia, Carlucci says. Based in west London, Lucy Hoosenally completed her five-bedroom masseria, set in 15 acres of olive groves between Lecce and Otranto, through Essentis last year and the firm is renting it out for 4,500 to 12,500 a week, when she, her husband and their three children are not using it (07766 514970, masserialaspinetta.com). This southern part of Italy is still a little undiscovered, Hoosenally says. We love the fact that the villages

might be a bit scrappy around the edges, but the historical centres are fabulous, with shops stocking five types of mozzarella, and farmers selling their produce off the back of trucks. The Mamma Mia! effect Alexandra Goss Estate agents on Skopelos split the history of their island into two parts: BMM and AMM, or Before Mamma Mia! and After Mamma Mia!. The 2008 musical, which featured Meryl Streep and Pierce Brosnan belting out Abba hits, made a star of its Aegean setting, all whitewashed houses, ramshackle streets and craggy coast. Every summer since the film came out we have had mainly middle-aged Britons coming into the office to ask about buying houses here, says Michael Burton, founder of Skopelos Property estate agency. They come here because of the movie they now dream of living on a Greek island, just the way Donna [played by Streep] did. Before Mamma Mia! there was Captain Corelli's Mandolin, the blockbuster 1994 novel by Louis de Bernières set on another Greek island, Cephalonia. Though the film adaptation starring Nicolas Cage and Penelope Cruz was widely panned, that didn't stop property hunters taking notice. It helped to put Cephalonia on the map, as only Corfu had really been of interest to British clients before then, says Marcus Gondolo-Gordon, director at Ionian International Real Estate. So, even if Walking on Sunshine turns out to be a turkey, it should be a hit with estate agents in Puglia.

Martina Franca 305,000 This complex of eight interconnected trulli offers large living and dining areas, in addition to two bedrooms and two bathrooms. Outside there is a private pool and a gazebo, surrounded by 1½ acres of cherry orchard, almond trees and olive groves. 00 39 804 322796, agenziadeitrulli.com

Ostuni 320,000 About three kilometres from the town of Ostuni, this modern villa has four bedrooms and a pool, while the sea is less than 10km away, and the airport 30km. There is 150 sq metres of living space, plus a barbecue terrace. 01322 660988, casatravella.com

Francavilla Fontana 610,000 Recently reduced by 80,000, Masseria degli Angeli is a four-bedroom restored farmhouse set in eight acres of olive groves, five minutes from the town. It has a courtyard, Roman bath and bell tower. info@gateway.com