

ForbesLife

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SPRING TRAVEL

HAPPY TRAILS In Kyrgyzstan

By P.J. O'Rourke



A partial list of volumes from the library at Escaiolo, a farmhouse southwest of Florence: *Under the Tuscan Sun*, *A Summer in Tuscany*, *The Hills of Tuscany*, *The Tuscan Year*, *Bella Tuscany*, *A Thousand Days in Tuscany*, *The Reluctant Tuscan*. Pick any one off the shelf for an expatriate's charmingly vexing misadventures in language, market shopping and home rehabilitation. As proprietor of Escaiolo, you'll nod your head in recognition of the first two and congratulate yourself on your happy ignorance of the third.

Determined do-it-yourselfers look elsewhere: Taking up residence at Escaiolo or one of the other farmhouses at Castello di Casole, an American-led real estate venture in central Tuscany, will not fulfill the fantasy of setting limestone blocks and terra-cotta tiles, of lifting ancient Etruscan artifacts from the rubble of your hilltop ruin. Situated amid rolling vineyards, Escaiolo has been fully restored and lavishly furnished, down to the infinity pool, wireless broadband and central air.

David Burden, president of Timbers Resorts, the Carbondale, Colorado-based developer of Castello di Casole, describes what his clients look for in an Italian retreat: "American luxury and comfort and today's electronics, but at the same time a very traditional Tuscan feel." Add to that resortlike services, and you have this 5,500-acre development of farmhouses and a medieval hilltop castle, which is being restored to open as a hotel and spa in summer 2008. Though only a half dozen farmhouses have been finished and offered for fractional (one-tenth) or whole ownership, Timbers plans to build as many as 50 on the picturesque, hilly property, both from the ruins of existing structures and as ground-up new constructions.

Getting building permits here meant winning the support of the neighboring population, and Timbers employed locals as craftsmen and staff and flew the mayor of nearby Casole d'Elsa to the company's other residence clubs in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, and Snowmass, Colorado, to show her what it had in mind. "Something that feels indigenous to the area," says Burden. "The new

Cozy Fan Tutte

Whether you'd like
a rural farmhouse or a
Florentine apartment,
your Italian retreat is ready,
furnished and waiting.



Old bones: San Giuseppe is one of the renovated farmhouses at Castello di Casole.



Via de' Tornabuoni is one of Florence's loveliest streets.

Buyers more susceptible to fantasies of Italian city life, more carried away by *A Room with a View* than *Under the Tuscan Sun*, should consider Palazzo Tornabuoni, a home to the Medicis during the Renaissance, an elegant, city-block-sized building on Florence's boutique-rich Via de' Tornabuoni. In 2004, a partnership of Italian and American developers purchased the palazzo (it had been headquarters to an Italian bank for much of the last century) and set about restoring it into 36 furnished apartments, offered in one-eighth shares: \$227,000 for a studio, \$294,000 for a one-bedroom and \$546,000 for two to three bedrooms. The apartments,

foyer. The partners hired Michele Bönan, of the Ferragamo-owned Lungarno hotels in Rome and Florence, to combine American touches such as open-plan kitchens and plasma TVs with the historic architectural details of the apartments.

Bönan's designs convinced Eric and Jeanne Brooks of Savannah, Georgia, to reserve a share of a Palazzo Tornabuoni one-bedroom. "When we went to see the palazzo [in October], it was certainly a work in progress," says Jeanne, "but the building is so fabulous, and when we saw the model—it was exquisite." The couple are frequent visitors to Florence, having rented apartments and stayed in several of the city's hotels. "I think this combines the best of both worlds," she says of the neighborly atmosphere and the convenience of a 24-hour concierge she expects to find at Palazzo Tornabuoni.

builds are going to look exactly the same as the [restorations]. We're using reclaimed materials and local architects. We don't want this to be Disney World."

So far Timbers has sold 76 fractional interests at Castello di Casole, each representing four weeks of guaranteed stay per year for \$585,000 to \$635,000 (whole ownership starts at \$6 million). Joanna Mosca, a singer/songwriter in Bedford, New York, bought two shares in a farmhouse called Vemignano with sweeping views of the surrounding countryside. She and her husband spent last summer in Umbria and were drawn to the idea of a second home in the country, but active careers in the U.S. made restoring their own unrealistic. Partial ownership at Castello di Casole struck "a perfect balance," says Mosca. "We could have really very few responsibilities and enjoy it as many weeks as we chose to purchase." She and her husband were impressed with Timbers' other residence clubs; they also liked the connections the developer had forged with the local population. "[Timbers] can't trim a tree without going to the town and asking permission, and that's a good thing, because we really fell in love with the way the property looks."



An apartment at Palazzo Tornabuoni

served by a club lounge, library and private wine cellar, are scheduled to be finished by spring of next year.

The project's American partner, J. Byrne Murphy, has restoration experience, having led Washington, D.C.'s Warner Theater re-opening in the early '90s. "I've been in a lot of beautiful buildings, but this one took me to a whole new place," he says. "This was a jewel people in my business almost never come across." There are Renaissance-era frescoes in several apartments and a 17th-century statue of the goddess Diana in the entrance

Like Castello di Casole, Palazzo Tornabuoni won't suit the pull-up-stakes-and-move-to-Italy fantasist, but rather an Italophile looking for a ready-made hideaway, happy to skip the hassle of finding a local notary and fixing the inevitable leaky roof. Such adventures might make for amusing chapters in a memoir—but perhaps the world has enough of those already. •

Castello di Casole, (866) 963-5005, www.castellodicasole.com; Palazzo Tornabuoni, (866) 753-6667, www.palazzotornabuoni.com.