



SICILIAN *Style*

It once played second fiddle to the Italian mainland, but Sicily's stunning scenery and affordable properties are making the island popular with second-home buyers

 LAURA LATHAM

WITH ITS GREAT BEACHES, sun-drenched hills, easy-going nature and local culture it's no wonder the Mediterranean island of Sicily has seen a boost in property investment in the past few years. "Until recently people came to Sicily for holidays, but it wasn't the obvious choice for property buyers," says Rupert Fawcett of estate agency Knight Frank. "But air access has improved and the roads are good, making it more viable."

Hot spots include historic Ortigia, the island off Siracusa, where restored apartments and townhouses fetch prices in excess of €200,000. The stunning towns of

Ragusa and Modica are also highly sought after, as is the north-east coast, within striking distance of Cefalù and Palermo. By comparison, the south-west is still quite undiscovered and traditionally Sicilian, with fewer tourists and international buyers, but even here things are starting to change. The beaches are astounding and it's possible to find farmhouses or outbuildings for conversion from around €100,000.

When Sean and Francesca Orr began looking for a second home, they wanted to be well placed for the best Sicily has to offer. Francesca, 39, is originally from

Palermo and has family on the island, and she and Sean, 42, felt that the gorgeous beaches and traditional towns were perfect for holidays with their eight-year-old twin girls, Sophia and Isabella.

On the lookout to convert a traditional farmhouse, the couple concentrated their search on the rural region near the UNESCO-listed baroque town of Modica. "The area sums up an idyllic vision of what Sicily is like," says Sean. "It's beautiful, peaceful and has more of a feel of traditional Sicilian life. It's also close to the coast and has a friendly community."



Left, Sicily offers a range of properties for development, some in truly stunning locations

THE COUPLE BOUGHT Casa Palazzelle, a stone farmhouse with land, in 2007 for €220,000. The property was habitable but needed updating, especially as the Orrs planned to rent it out. So they spent the next year having the building rewired and redecorated, turning it into a beautiful and stylish home. “We wanted somewhere we would love to visit and that other people would enjoy staying in,” says Sean.

Along with three bedrooms, Casa Palazzelle now has two bathrooms and a luxury kitchen. The rough garden has been replaced by a large pool, which is gated

for child safety, and terraces of local stone, bordered by fruit trees and open fields. “It’s perfect for families and we spend as much time here as we can,” says Sean. “We’re lucky that the house appeals to a lot of people, so we’ve been really busy renting it out to holidaymakers for the last two summers.”

Thanks in part to Francesca’s Sicilian roots, the family has been welcomed into the local community. “The neighbours are wonderful and look after our house when we aren’t there,” says Sean. “It isn’t essential to have local links or to speak Italian, but it definitely helps.”

Sean also advises that, when buying here, you need sound legal representation to check the title deeds are clean and that there are no structural issues, claims or debts on the property. “A good agent will check that there are no contractual issues before taking a property on,” he says. “But you need to make sure you follow the legal processes properly.”

Although the Orrs were looking for a typical Sicilian farmhouse, it’s not the only type of property generating interest. The international hotel group The Rocco Forte Collection has created Verdura, an exclusive 230-hectare golf and spa resort near Sciacca.

BUYING IN SICILY? NAME YOUR PRICE...

UNDER €100,000

Pozzallo, Ragusa

A good buy for someone after a restoration project. Only 100m from the Blue Flag beach of Pozzallo, this two-storey, 90m² art nouveau house needs complete renovation. Boasting many original features, including floors, vaulted ceilings, balconies and doors, the property could become a stunning holiday home. Available for €80,000 through Modicasa, tel: +39 0932 751 798, modicasa.com

UNDER €300,000

Casa da Aguglia, Palazzolo

This country manor is in the small town of Palazzolo, within easy reach of Siracusa, close to Catania. Tucked away in woodland, the house dates to the early 1900s and has already had some restoration work. The property has three bedrooms, two bathrooms and an outdoor kitchen with wood-burning oven plus terraced gardens. Available for €260,000 through Hamptons International Sicily, tel: +39 0931 462 726, hamptons.co.uk

UNDER €700,000

Abbazia Santa Maria dei Pratali, Cefalù

This traditional fortified farmhouse needs extensive restoration but could easily be transformed into an idyllic country retreat. In the Madonie National Park, near Cefalù on the north coast, the property offers five hectares of land, several buildings in local stone, including a 12th-century Norman chapel, and stunning views to the sea. Available for €650,000 through Knight Frank, tel: +44 (0)20 7629 8171, knightfrank.com



Left and below, the Orrs found the perfect second home for their family in the UNESCO-listed town of Modica



The resort opened last year and attracts a high-flying international clientèle. Many guests are already expressing interest in the planned private villa development, which will offer 55 detached homes with amazing sea views from €2m.

Rupert Fawcett says clients are generally looking for property in the €400,000 to €1.5m range, which affords a “substantial” villa with some land. If you’re prepared to be further from main roads and airports you can find deals on restoration projects or a small one- and two-bed village home from around €100,000, or even less if it’s remote and in a bad state. For restored historic properties or nice two-bedroom places in tourist areas or near the coast, expect to pay from around €250,000 and from €300,000 for small palazzos in need of attention or new-build villas with three-to-four bedrooms.

“Prices are about 20 to 25% lower than three years ago,” says local agent Giuseppe Giliberti of Hamptons International. “And it’s easier to negotiate with vendors

now, especially if a property needs work. For around €200,000 you can find good properties, such as an apartment of around 80m² in Ortigia, or a decent two-bed townhouse in the Modica or Ragusa area.”

THE REGION AROUND Taormina is one of the most expensive and sought after on the island and, according to Giliberti, you should expect to pay three times more for a home here than in the next most popular town, Siracusa. Also becoming attractive are the jet-set Aeolian islands, such as Panarea and Lipari, where prices are high because development has been restricted to preserve their natural beauty.

A small one-bed apartment or dated cottage with no view will set you back on average €250,000, with large family-size villas heading north of €2m. “The market for the islands is driven by investors who want to make the most of the rental opportunities, rather than second-home owners,” Giliberti says. “Even basic villas in less popular locations can rent for in excess of €3,000 per month in summer.” He adds that elsewhere in Sicily, holiday lets can bring in returns of, “on average, 5% per annum”.

No longer regarded as the poor relation to mainland Italy, Sicily’s popularity spells good news for second-home buyers as well as tourists. Take the plunge and, like the Orr family, you could also enjoy Sicily’s *dolce vita*. For information on renting Casa Palazzelle, go to modicasa.com

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