

The long and winding road

Steve and Karen's journey to owning a dream home in Italy was something of an obstacle race – which is why they set out to make the process a lot easier for those who want to follow in their footsteps...

Words by Anne Coombes, pictures by Mike Johnson

Karen Carson and Steve White have done what many dream of and few dare: they have given up their regular jobs and built a successful business in a beautiful part of Italy.

It started with their desire to create a better lifestyle for themselves, with more time for fun and for the people who mattered to them. Never one to shy away from bold decisions, Steve decided to sell his IT company in order to finance a property purchase to use as an investment.

At the time, the couple were living in the Surrey market town of Reigate, which

seemed to offer good rental returns. But they were bitterly disappointed to discover that their money would only buy them a soulless 1970s' one-bed apartment near the station. Not quite the investment they had in mind.

Steve did not give up easily, and surfed the Internet to see what was available in Italy. Born in Florence to an Italian mother and English father, Steve was no stranger to Tuscany. He had visited the mountains outside Florence every year during his childhood, as his grandparents had a restored home, 'Volpinaia' (Foxes' Lair), in the area. He also had fond memories of the farm his aunt and uncle had bought and restored in Tuscany, which had its own vineyard and olive grove.

You could say that Italy was in his blood. So, when Steve saw details of a derelict pair of properties in the hills of Umbria, he knew that this was what they had been looking for. What comparison could there possibly be

between a functional flat in Surrey and a romantic ramshackle farmhouse in Italy?

The property exactly fitted the couple's criteria: two separate houses, both ripe for restoration, at a reasonable price. Level-headed enough not to be carried along in a wave of naive enthusiasm, Steve did a lot of research on other Italian properties, coming to the conclusion that Casa Pantano was indeed a good buy. Karen meanwhile had fallen in love at first sight with the house that would eventually become theirs. As she puts it: "We followed our hearts."

Once they arrived in Italy to view Casa Pantano, the couple might well have been put off from proceeding further. The main house was in a dreadful condition – there was rubbish everywhere, with tents inside to keep out the rain, while the 'restored' building was a sad testimony to shoddy workmanship. However, neither of these setbacks deterred

the couple from seeing beyond the chaos to the potential of the properties.

Having left England the night before during a bitterly cold English downpour, Steve and Karen woke the next morning in a small hotel in Sansepolcro to the sound of pealing bells and cicadas. Flinging open the shutters, they were enchanted by their view of terracotta rooftops and the vivid aromas of fresh coffee and pastries. What further confirmation did they need?

Following an initial deposit of 30 per cent to secure the contract, Steve and Karen returned to Italy to sign the legal papers for the final transaction, while Karen's parents drove out with a van-load of furniture.

After two hours of waiting at the notario's (solicitor's) office, they were informed that there was a problem with an existing loan on the property that would need to be cleared before the deeds could be transferred. This





This page Karen and Steve's project was a restoration drama that finally had a happy ending

Facing page The couple are always on the lookout for new properties and areas that will charm British buyers

was expected to take two weeks. In fact, it was a staggering two years before Steve and Karen finally owned the house!

Aside from the red tape, organising the renovations was another headache. But, as Shakespeare put it, 'The course of true love never did run smooth'. While Steve took a sledgehammer to the kitchen and Karen ripped out the red plastic bathroom fittings of the 'restored' property, work on the main house was fraught with difficulty. The couple had to chase up the local architect for plans, photographs and information. They had the overriding feeling that they didn't matter, and neither did their house.

There was a long, frustrating period of trying to sort out the details before building started, with no advice as to how to proceed with the restoration. Despite his Italian roots, Steve felt as if he was on foreign territory. Where do you go to buy a chainsaw? What bricks should one choose?

Once work had started on restoring the main house, the problems continued. Lack of communication between the architect and the builders led to horrors such as the kitchen being put into the living room and the second house being completely stripped

of belongings after the keys were left at the site! Every house-building nightmare seemed to be coming true.

It was at this point that the couple decided that Steve would go to Italy for six months to oversee the building work and to protect their investment. It soon became clear that the local men working on the house were very skillful craftsmen but that the managers needed more direction. So Steve began to work very closely with the builders, designing the layout and interior himself.

Despite being told that many of his ideas could not be implemented, he persevered, saving a beautiful brick wall from being plastered over and preventing an old beam from being sawn in half.

Steve supplied the attention to detail that had been lacking. He found this immensely satisfying. "For all the bad things that have happened, we have ended up with the house we wanted," he now reflects. But that's due to our own drive, not the agent's guidance."

For Steve and Karen, renovating the house was much more than just a physical process: "Restoring a property is a bit like having a child: you put a lot of yourself into it. You are a part of it and it becomes a part of you."



The couple were relieved when house was finally finished and the builders left. They could now enjoy the lovely home they had created and found they wanted to spend more time there. Having put their hearts and souls into its renovation, it seemed a waste to use it only occasionally. In the process of restoration, the couple had also learned that they had a passion for property.

"What drives us is a respect for these beautiful buildings – they have their own histories, but have been sadly abandoned. We have a strong desire, almost a duty, to restore their life and soul," says Steve.

So, the idea was born to renovate other properties, rescue other 'lost souls' and turn their experience into a business. They both felt that this could be the life change they had been searching for when Steve first sold his IT company.

Sitting by their wood-burning stove on a cold winter's day, they wondered how to turn their dreams into reality. Spurred on by the encouragement of friends, they decided to advertise in a national newspaper as an Italian property advisory service. Their slogan was: 'From legal matters to lampshades, we will help you to get your dream home'. The next

morning the phone started ringing – and Historic Italian Homes was born.

It became clear that many people shared Steve and Karen's dream of owning a property in Italy, but found the process too daunting or too time-consuming to pursue on their own. Steve and Karen discovered there was a real market for a professional househunting service that also helped transform a house into a home.

In their new role as househunters, the couple began doing their research, looking at properties, gauging prices and building up contacts. A chance meeting during one of their research trips resulted in them teaming up with a valuable local expert. Searching for a property agent, they were directed to the office of the local architect.

The elegant interior spoke of refined good taste but it was the huge colourful paintings that caught Steve and Karen's eye. They recognised the distinctive signature as being that of the property agent they had been hunting for, Kiki Fleming.

Kiki's partner Gaudio, who was the local senior 'geometra' (architect/surveyor), had become known as 'the Saviour of the Umbrian Towers' for his passionate interest



MY LIFE IN THE SUN ITALY

FARMHOUSE TO RESTORE €106,420



This home is a delightful farmhouse located in the Umbrian countryside, in Scarcatio, not far from Castiglione del Lago and Lake Trasimeno. It is 120 square metres in extent and has six rooms, including three bedrooms, organised on three floors. It even comes with 3,000 square metres of land. Great investment.

Contact Homes in Italy: 01332 341 146;
www.homesinitaly.co.uk.

HERITAGE HOME €295,000 (€200,332)



Within the ancient fortified borgo of Migianella dei Marchesi is this stunning, structurally sound casa canonica (church house) requiring sympathetic restoration. It has 12 rooms with original beams and old terracotta floors, plus a garden with countryside views. Umbertide's markets are 15 minutes away by car.

Contact Green Umbria: 0039 0759 410830;
www.greenumbria.com.

HOLY FARMHOUSE €360,000 (€244,569)



Magnificent, secluded old stone farmhouse with annexed chapel lies on a knoll overlooking the rolling hills around Todi in Montecastello di Vibio, a wonderful part of Perugia. The two-level building is surrounded by a beautiful walnut wood and cropland. However, full-scale renovation of the property is required.

Contact Go-Umbria.com:
www.go-umbria.com; info@go-umbria.com.



The couple's warm and welcoming kitchen. Steve staying on-site ensured that original features were retained

It became clear that many people shared Steve and Karen's dream of owning a property in Italy, but found the process too daunting or time-consuming to proceed on their own

in reclaiming local architecture. Having restored up to 350 properties over a period of 35 years, he was a man who embodied their ideals. After a day spent together looking at properties, the two couples found a common bond in their belief that every house has a 'soul'.

Gaudio's fear was that unscrupulous builders were jumping on the restoration bandwagon, with very few doing a proper job. His own code of practice includes restoring a property sensitively for posterity, helping to bring back to life lost parts of Italy's heritage.

He also prides himself on giving a realistic quotation and, in most cases, a fixed-price contract. This is a rare and precious safeguard in this line of business, as Steve and Karen had discovered to their cost!

With this strong 'simpatia' in common, it became clear that together they could move their businesses forward. Steve and Karen decided that their business would start with exploring exactly what clients wanted and then setting out to find it.

With Gaudio's expertise on board, even the most dilapidated building had the potential to look as if it had been tenderly nurtured for hundreds of years.

Steve and Karen's policy is to research a client's requirements thoroughly prior to showing them a carefully selected handful of properties. It is not uncommon for clients to find their ideal property on their first day of viewing. The process continues with the preparation of building plans and their execution under Gaudio's skillful eye.

Steve and Karen also offer their clients as much help and advice as they need to negotiate Italian legal contracts, building regulations and financial arrangements. If necessary, they can even include tailor-made shopping trips for clients to choose their kitchens, bathrooms and furniture. Their aim is to provide a personal service in every aspect of the restoration process.

Steve and Karen have had the deferred joy of seeing clients' dreams come to fruition, with projects ranging from large to small.

Their first customer was a lady of 60 with a modest budget who wanted a complete lifestyle change. Within four months she was happily settled in an enchanting apartment. One young couple are now living their dream running their own small hotel. Another set out looking for a ready-to-buy holiday home, but were so impressed by Gaudio that they renovated an older property instead. Another very busy couple have transformed the two ivy-clad walls of a hilltop ruin into an elegant four-bedroom home.

And so, with the team's skill and enthusiasm, those who never thought their dreams could be realised are now enjoying the experience of life in Italy.

Steve and Karen can now sometimes be found touching base in their Gothic 'castello' in deepest Sussex – but you can be sure that it will not be long before their next visit to the green heart of Italy. ☀

To contact Historic Italian Homes, call 0870 787 5338/9 or visit www.historicity.co.uk.