

More than just a holiday home

An overseas home can give you the chance to buy into a lifestyle, whether it's making wine in France or helping wildlife in Africa. By **Zoe Dare Hall**

At Les Celliers du Vent, a small winery in the Languedoc, David Alcaraz, the chief winemaker, has set us a challenge. With five bottles of syrah, merlot and cabernet sauvignon — oaked and unoaked — to play with, we have to create a new blend to be sold in Waitrose.

This isn't just a tasting test to amuse tourists. "This wine has to be on the shelves next week, so we have to come up with something good," says Alcaraz, whose clients include big winemakers and supermarkets, which approach him to create their own-label brands.

We set about sniffing, spitting, debating whether there's too much leather or too little blackberry, before eventually agreeing on a blend that satisfies Alcaraz. "This is the special, supersecret stuff you never get to do as a tourist," says a fellow taster, Suzanne Michaud, a former investment banker from New York.

It's true that the average visitor to the Languedoc won't enjoy such a behind-the-scenes insight. By contrast, those who buy property at Château Les Carrasses, a 19th-century wine estate spanning 13 acres in Capetang, near Béziers, will be able to become involved in every part of wine production, from the initial vine training to bottling and, of course, drinking — although there is no guarantee your work will ever end up on a supermarket shelf. Whatever remains after every buyer has had their 50 free cases a year will be sold as the chateau's own vintage.

"You can become a winemaker — or as close as you get without the panic of 'Oh my God, the frost has ruined my harvest and now my kids won't eat'," says Karl O'Hanlon, director of Domaine & Demeure, which is developing the site. "There may be about 60% fewer buyers in the market than there were a couple of years ago, but they are still all telling me that they want authenticity, integration and intimacy, in interesting old renovated buildings, in or near a lively village and near the beach."

David Sullivan, a solicitor from north London, is among them. He has just paid £317,000 for the two-bedroom workshop, whose old car pit will be turned into a glass floor looking onto the *cave* below. It was the opportunity to become involved in wine production that drew him to Les Carrasses, rather than other conversions of historic buildings.

"I've been babbling on about finding a place in the sun for a long time — I've looked in Portugal, Mallorca and France — but this project jumped out from the rest, with the wine element bringing a sociable feel to the development and attracting an international range of buyers," says Sullivan, 48. "The Languedoc is easy to get to for an impromptu long weekend, with lovely countryside, nice beaches and almost year-round sun."

Prices in the fairy-tale turreted chateau

start at £186,000 for a one-bedroom flat, rising to £540,000 for a four-bedroom property. There are also flats in converted out-buildings. Buyers will share club areas, tennis court and pool (some properties have private pools). O'Hanlon says he expects good rental demand: letting for the entire season should give a 4%-5% return. Work on the conversion will start next January, with completion expected in mid-2011.

Wine-lovers are also catered for at Palazzo Tornabuoni, a restored 14th-century palace in Florence, where buyers can sample Brunello from the barrel with one of the region's leading winemakers. If art is more to their taste, they can take after-hours tours of the Uffizi gallery when it is closed to the public, and have exclusive access to private exhibitions and artists.

"We can get owners all sorts of private access and personal connections so that they feel they belong in town the moment they step off the plane," says Natasha Garland, the palazzo's head of "attaché services". The emphasis, she says, is on the bespoke rather than producing a list of "menu items". At present, for example, she is working on a request by an American owner to meet local football managers.

"We try to cater to each owner's interests," she says. "They can look people up when they next come to Florence, and for local people, it's a fun way to meet people from abroad, so we can create unique relationships." The complex is being sold on a fractional-ownership basis: prices start at £192,000 for a one-eighth share of a studio flat, although owners can use their properties for extra weeks if they are free.

Elaine Leeper, a dental surgeon from south London, and her husband, Kim, managing director of an electrical software company, paid £240,500 for a one-bedroom property. At £12,200, the service charge is high — so they are making good use of what Elaine calls the "added value" elements.

"We are opera and music junkies, so we are looking forward to a dinner with the conductor Zubin Mehta, and we're also requesting cookery classes in the palace's high-tech kitchens," says Elaine, 57. "We're next staying there in July, and have asked them to book a wine tasting, a visit to one of the art-conservation labs and a tour of the Vasari corridor on the Ponte Vecchio, not normally accessible to tourists."

The real draw, she says, is their "little black book of places to go", drawing on recommendations from other owners. "They are trying to make this a proper cultural club, with members really wanting to socialise and interact with others in the palazzo, not spend days out touring, then slink back into their flat for a hot bath and a G&T."

More organic experiences are in store for buyers at La Masseria, in Puglia, southern Italy, where you can buy a five-acre plot on which local craftsmen will construct a bespoke stone farmhouse. Prices, including building, start at about £640,000. "You are free to grow your own fruit, vegetables, olives and grapes, or, if you would rather enjoy the fruits without the labour, you can sign up to a scheme where local



At Château Les Carrasses, in the Languedoc, buyers can participate in the winemaking process

"BUYERS TELL ME THAT THEY WANT AUTHENTICITY, INTEGRATION AND INTIMACY, IN INTERESTING OLD BUILDINGS"

farmers do it for you, providing you with a share of the produce," says Rupert Fawcett, head of the Italian department of Knight Frank estate agency, which is marketing the property. "Tending your own olives or vines is a full-on job, so people who aren't going to be there for much of the year are happy to pay more for a high-quality property where they



Track leopards at the Phinda reserve, in South Africa, where luxury eco-lodges start at £3.8m



Palazzo Tornabuoni, in Florence, offers cultural 'attaché services'



can reap the benefits of owning land without the hassle of doing it themselves."

Such closeness to nature — or "luxury", as it is known — is the appeal of Minthis Hills, near Paphos, Cyprus, where light-filled, contemporary three-bed villas start at £900,000. Each is on a large landscaped plot with vines and olive trees. "It's a stressful world at the moment, so we're trying to promote escapism," says Tony Nathanael, commercial director of Pafilia, the developer. "Minthis Hills is three times the size of Hyde Park, so you feel surrounded by nature, with houses that blend inside and out. But we realise that buyers are unlikely to spend more than a few weeks here each year, so for about £50 a month we will find staff to look after their vines and trees when they're not there. We'll teach people what growing grapes and olives is all about."

For those who prefer their barefoot luxury more exotic, Limpopo-Lipadi, in eastern Botswana, allows buyers to become involved in all aspects of working on a game reserve while staying in five-star lodges set in 32,000 hectares of unspoilt African bush. Buyers are shareholders in the project — with one share costing £130,000, for which you can stay as often as you like in any of the camps or lodges.

"We train you to become a game ranger and be directly involved in reintroducing endangered wildlife such as black rhinos and cheetahs," says Alan Marnewick, the project's founder. "You're not just a passive observer — you do a job." Also on offer to investors are lessons in the local Setswana language, astronomy and bushcraft.

"This is one of the last African wildernesses, so family holidays here are spent being trained to track wildlife on foot or darting wild dogs," he adds. "Or if you prefer, you can just lounge under a 100-year-old tree in front of your luxury lodge."

Learning experiences, it seems, are highly fulfilling — provided you can return to the lap of luxury at the end of the day.

✦ Les Carrasses; 01360 770045, domaine-demeure.com. Palazzo Tornabuoni; 0870 609 8555, palazzotornabuoni.com. La Masseria; 020 7629 8171, knightfrank.co.uk/international. Minthis Hills; 00 357 99 381684, minthishills.com. Limpopo-Lipadi Game & Wilderness Reserve; 0871 244 5152, www.limpopo-lipadi.com. Phinda Private Game Reserve; 00 27 11 809 4300, africanhomesteads.com

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Three developments where you can join in with the locals



France from £175,000

The Jardins de St Benoît development is all about being part of the local community in the idyllic Languedoc village of St-Laurent-de-la-Cabrerisse. Buyers can take part in the winemaking process, tend to the medieval gardens and make olive oil with members of the local co-op. Unfurnished one-bed townhouses, set around pedestrianised streets and cobbled squares, start at £175,000. Two-bed houses start at £218,000. *Garrigae Resorts; 0871 218 2103, garrigae.com*



Argentina from £15,000

At Dos Rosas, in the Mendoza region, owners can buy ¼-acre vineyards from £15,000 — to be managed by the estate — on which they can choose their own grapes and help with wine production. They receive 200 bottles a year and 50% of the net profits. They can also build their own house among the vines: 40 two-acre plots are on sale, priced at £200,000 each. A four-bed detached house would cost about £110,000 to build. *Property Frontiers; 01865 202700, propertyfrontiers.com*



South Africa from £8,000

Buyers of the 12 thatched lodges at the Dinkweng safari camp, three hours north of Johannesburg — sold on a fractional ownership basis from £8,000 for one week per year — can join programmes to conserve endangered animals, including cheetahs and leopards, in the adjoining wildlife sanctuary. In the heart of the bush, the lodges are fully equipped, with three ensuite bedrooms and flatscreen TVs. There is also a spa, tennis court and bar. *Zorgvliet Group; 0800 046 9196, zorgvliet.com*