



# FROM RUIN TO RICHES

Fed up of the rat race, **Bob Garner** and **Ian Richards** sold their London property to buy a run-down farmhouse in rural Le Marche, which they converted into luxury holiday apartments...

**S**ometimes, when we have time to stand in the landscaped gardens of our handsome traditional farmhouse, we have to pinch ourselves to remember that when our property was first featured in *The Italian* magazine in October 2005 it was a ramshackle wreck. During the following years it sometimes seemed impossible that, in early 2009, we would be looking forward to a third successful season, and planning new ways to help people discover Le Marche.

We have always been fans of Italy, its food, wines and people, the fantastic diversity of the countryside, vibrant cities, skiing in the Alps and Dolomites. So when our friend Jo moved to Rome we seized the opportunity to pay regular visits to the city. On one such trip Bob accompanied Jo to stay with a friend who had bought a house in Recanati, one of the beautiful Renaissance towns in the Marche region.

He was instantly captivated by the stunning scenery, the views down to the Adriatic sea in the east and the awesome Sibillini mountains to the west. Back in London Ian took little persuading; we were both ready



## MEET THE READERS



**Names:** Bob Garner and Ian Richards

**Occupations:** First restoring, now running, Casal dei Fichi holiday apartments

**Where have they moved to?** From Stoke Newington, London to Francavilla d'Ete in central Marche

**When did they make the move to Italy:** March 2005

**Contact:** To find out more about staying at Casal dei Fichi, see [www.casaldefichi.com](http://www.casaldefichi.com) or call +39 0734 959018

to move on and Ian even managed to get made redundant, which paid for the swimming pool!

Planning that one day we would pursue a lifestyle change, we spent years investing all our spare cash into paying off our mortgage. This meant that we had a reasonable amount to invest. Tuscany was out of the question but Marche offered an equally beautiful, much more affordable, but also a much more 'Italian' solution.

On a week's holiday to get to know the area better, we soon concluded that where we were staying in the beautiful Sibillini National Park was too high up, and even in September we were feeling the first chill of autumn. After seeing perhaps only ten properties, an estate agent showed us a house just outside Francavilla d'Ete, a tiny hilltop village between the renaissance cities of Macerata and Fermo. Immediately we fell in love with the view, and the house was the perfect size, easily



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lending itself to division into seven apartments. This would provide our only income; we had calculated that we would need to rent out six holiday apartments to make a living. The seventh, in the loft, would become our home.

Whilst the vendors were eager to be rid of the house, abandoned for 30 years, they were less keen to part with prime farming land. The house was offered with a handkerchief-sized plot. Bob spent a hard day negotiating and gained a small reduction in price and a reasonable increase in the land, though with hindsight Bob realised he capitulated too readily. A lesson we progressively learnt: never take anything at face value, everything is negotiable.

The *compromesso* (agreement to purchase) signed, Ian drew up the plans, first dividing the building into spacious apartments. The project plan followed, showing that after the agreed completion on 31 >>



Left to right: The rear of the house; The pool was paid for with a redundancy settlement; Bob in house during renovation – this was to become a living room





**"THE FIRST GUESTS WERE FRIENDS, SO THEY DIDN'T MIND MAKING THEIR BEDS – LITERALLY – WE EVEN SUPPLIED THE SCREWDRIVERS!"**

March 2004 the architect would request planning consent on 1 April for building work to start in June, with the structural work completed by the end of the year. We planned to move to Italy in January and work towards completing the project by Easter 2005.

On a summer visit to Rome, around a table outside a busy restaurant we discussed the naming of the house with our Italian teacher Diego, who happened to be in town, and various Italian friends. The house has several fig trees, one particularly impressive, so Casal dei Fichi (fig farmhouse) seemed an obvious option. Diego put in a call to the boss, phoning Mama in Venezia. Result – she approved.

The worst winter in a generation, amongst other things, meant that despite having postponed our move to Italy by several months, when we arrived in our bulging white transit van work on the property had barely started.

#### BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Having taken on, but not completed, another (indoor) job to see him through the winter, Rosario, the builder, was not in any great rush to make a start on Casal dei Fichi. However, over a sumptuous Easter Sunday lunch with Rosario's family a plan was formulated: work would start in two weeks. The 'lunch', accompanied by litres of potent homemade wine and followed by generous quantities of *grappa* finally finished at about 7pm.



Rosario's first job was to structurally complete a single-storey annex to the house in which we lived while he finished the rest of the house. With bare concrete floors and walls – and no electricity or heating – the accommodation was very basic. A portable gas heater, woolly hats and socks, hot water bottles, two thick duvets and *Aglia* and *Olio*, the cats, kept us warm through the cold winter nights. The days were spent hacking plaster off the walls, ripping out the old windows and any other menial chores that would help keep Rosario's bills down. Later in the project Ian installed the electrical works, a local contractor ensuring that everything met Italian standards.

We had studied Italian before leaving London, so although basic our language skills were enough to communicate, and spending all day on a building site meant we soon became fluent in the more colourful aspects of the language, sometimes without realising it.

Finally, in May 2006, the house was pretty well finished. The first guests were eight friends, so they didn't mind being asked to make their own beds – literally – we even supplied screwdrivers!

Casal dei Fichi opened for business in 2007 and we have been overjoyed by the success we have enjoyed. We set out to create high-specification luxury apartments, which our guests certainly seem to appreciate. Many customers return, sometimes four or five times, some love to lie by the pool and soak up the sun and the views, some like to explore the mountains and the beautiful cities like Fermo and Ascoli Piceno. Others set out to discover the tranquil coves around the Conero peninsula; while children, of all ages, love to try their hand at making their own creation at the weekly pizza night. It is a real pleasure to see our customers enjoy themselves, and we try to strike a balance being helpful and available while not being intrusive. We are really proud that, out of more than 400 properties, Casal dei Fichi has the highest Trip Advisor rating in Marche!





### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

When we bought Casal dei Fichi we had a long list of criteria, at the top: stunning views, within an hour of Ancona airport and close to basic facilities. The only box not ticked was a restaurant within walking distance. So one evening, on a quiet stroll around the town, we were delighted to see that one had opened – hurrah! Soon Vincenzo, an elderly man, grabbed our arms and insisted on showing us around, explaining that his son was one of the owners. We stayed, for *just one* beer, then Fausto, Vincenzo's son, arrived, the restaurant filled up, the wine flowed, food followed, then tequila, guitars, sombreros... and by 3am new and lasting friendships were forged. 'Madre Tierra' is owned by Fausto and four of his friends, who run the restaurant with a lot of help from their mums. We have since worked closely with them organising parties, cooking and serving a curry to 40 people thanks to

Clockwise from top left: The house was overgrown after being unoccupied for 30 years; The living room of one of the apartments; The bedroom of the same apartment; Our bathroom – luxury after two years without one!; Ian measures up the job in hand

Kamini, a holidaying Indian friend. In the summer Madre Tierra has occasional theme nights in our grounds, and they are the caterers to any weddings we host.

In November 2008 we held 'Gourmet Olive Breaks', where customers were indulged in a four-day introduction to Marche, featuring lunch and wine-tasting at the award-winning Umani Ronchi vineyard, a seafood lunch in a stunning restaurant overlooking the Conero peninsula, and dinners in atmospheric local restaurants. At Il Maniero arts club they learnt some of the secrets of Italian cookery and made some of the five courses that became lunch. To work it off they tried their hand at olive picking, and following a fascinating visit to the press they returned home with a litre of fresh, extra-virgin, cold-pressed olive oil. The breaks were very well received – and very favourably reviewed in one of the Sunday broadsheets.

We certainly have no regrets about our move to Italy, and although are always on call we find the work rewarding and fulfilling. Even in summer we have a strict policy of taking a day off every week and exploring the region, maybe a good lunch then taking the dogs for a long walk along one of the quieter stretches of coastline. Our favourite, though, is to catch the early boat from Numana, which follows the dramatic coast south of Ancona to the otherwise inaccessible beach at Due Sorelle (Two Sisters), named after the pinnacles that dominate it. After a few hours sun and swimming we catch the midday boat halfway back to Spiaggia San Michele, where lunch at the stunning Da Silvio restaurant leaves time for another swim before catching the 3pm boat back. Particularly on days like these we find it difficult to think that we would ever want to move back to Britain. **TIM**