

## Demand remains high for Europe's most historic homes

By Catherine Bolgar

**H**ISTORIC homes, where the walls whisper tales of the past, are highly prized rare pearls.

Guillaume Féau, owner of the Féau & Cie in Paris, installs or restores period wood paneling in homes around the world. He sees three types of clients: those who want architecture of, say, the 18th century, as a background to a modern décor; those who want a mix of history and modernity; and those who want everything authentic to the period.

People in the last group, he says, are not as numerous as the others, but "they buy the best, and they do it very seriously."

He sees an increase in interest in period living. "About 10 years ago, we were doing eight rooms a year. Now we're doing 80," he says.

Here is a sampling of outstanding period homes around Europe:

### France

Most of the historic chateaux in France, dating to the 16th and 17th centuries, tend to be near Paris, says Maria-Anna Burger, co-founder of Burger Sotheby's International Realty in Cannes. In the south, "it was mostly just fishing villages, until the 18th

century, when the English and Russians started coming to the Cote d'Azur," she says.

There are exceptions. Last month, Indian billionaire Vijay Mallya, chairman of United Breweries, bought the only residence on the island of Sainte-Marguerite, off the coast of Cannes. It was offered in a price range around €40 million. The property called le Grand Jardin, or Great Garden, is made up of three buildings, the Governor's House, Metayers House and the Tower, and interest was high from prospective buyers.

The legendary "man in the iron mask" was imprisoned there by King Louis XIV. A tower on the property dates to the 6th century, and the estate's walls were built by order of Cardinal Richelieu.

### U.K.

Buyers of period homes in the U.K. are diverse, ranging from landed English gentry to Russian and Indian billionaires, says Will Matthews, country house agent for London-based global property consultancy Knight Frank.

He sees a handful of buyers who want a property from a specific period, such as Georgian architecture. "Some people are adamant about retaining period features," he says, "or, if those features have been removed, they go in and put them back."



Frescoed walls and ceilings adorn a 17th-century hilltop villa in Lari, near Pisa.

One property that came on the market in September is Aldworth House in Surrey, some 40 miles southwest of London, built in 1869 for Alfred Lord Tennyson, who chose the site for its views and seclusion. With seven bedrooms, six baths, a pool and a helicopter hangar, it is receiv-

ing offers over £10 million (€13 million).

### Spain

Historical properties are among the most difficult to sell, says Artur Stabinski, managing director of Fincas Exclusivas, an affiliate of Christie's Great Estates, based in Barcelona. At the same time, "prices of really unique properties don't go down," he says. In general, sellers of such rare properties prefer to wait rather than discount.

Mr. Stabinski sees history-minded buyers mostly from the northern part of Western Europe, though some also are Spaniards. Most try to maintain the period ambience in the décor. "They have the huge TV screen, but it's completely hidden until they want to look at it," he says.

Historical properties close to the sea are rare, Mr. Stabinski says. But only 10 minutes from the Mediterranean, between Girona and Figueras, lies a 12-bedroom 15th-century €6 million home covering 1,600 square meters. Most of the rooms maintain the period style, including a perfectly preserved — and still functional — 15th-century kitchen.

Just south of Barcelona, on the seafloor near Sitges, a 15th-century hermitage, comprising 10 bedrooms and 10 bathrooms is listed at €3.3 million. The build-

ing was a hospital in the 17th century and turned into a church in the 18th century — it still has a chapel inside. In the post-war years, cultural icons such as Salvador Dali gathered there.

### Italy

In Tuscany, Siena and Florence were at the heart of the Renaissance. The confluence of architecture, art, culture and history makes Tuscany a magnet for people seeking period living, says Giorgio Piccini, owner of Piccini & Partners, an affiliate of Christie's Great Estates in Florence.

Despite the global financial crisis, buyers are still coming, mostly from Russia, India and Switzerland, he says. Russians seek large villas near the coast, with many bedrooms and a big pool — the highest luxury target. Indians and the Swiss gravitate toward the oldest Tuscan-style homes.

Frescoed walls and ceilings adorn a 17th-century hilltop villa in Lari, near Pisa. With 12 bedrooms and 10 baths in 1,000 square meters, the home is listed at €7 million. In Chianti and also with a chapel (from 1584), Villa Strozzi, listed at €18 million, dates to the 18th century, though it was previously an Etruscan, and then a Roman, settlement. The Strozzi family was a historic enemy of the powerful Medici.

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