

He's Over the Tuscan Sun

Forget the books and the movies. Greg Evans has a new take on the Italian villa-renovation fantasy: Do it from afar.

By Robin Cherry
June 2004

Greg Evans is, frankly, tired of the Frances Mayes question. He doesn't have anything against the author of *Under the Tuscan Sun*, but, no, she wasn't the inspiration for his business, Tuscan Hills, LLC (www.tuscan-hills.com). If you've read all the restoration-fantasy books, seen the movies—formerly hard-charging American buys fixer-upper in idyllic European village and discovers that working with contractors is somehow enchanting when you don't speak the language—and dreamed about years of slaving in the pastoral countryside to build that house, Tuscan Hills is not for you. If, on the other hand, your dream is to buy a rough gem in the Italian hills and e-mail or videoconference your architectural desires from the United States to the team over there who will renovate and decorate it to your specifications, it might be time to forgo the book deal and talk to Evans. Tuscan Hills will even take care of renting out your (realistic) dream home when you're not there, so you can keep your job that's not raising grapes or goats.

Evans and his wife, Suzanne, fell in love with Tuscany while traveling around the area in the late 1980s but didn't start Tuscan Hills until late last year. Because new construction is prohibited outside major Italian cities, villa restoration is all but inevitable. The law says that existing buildings—even a pile of rubble can qualify—must be restored to their original condition, so contractors pore through files and aerial photographs from World War I and World War II to determine where the structures were and what they looked like. Evans partners with a realtor and contractor in Tuscany to ensure that the process runs smoothly for his American home buyers, who should prepare to spend between \$125 and \$150 per square foot for restoration. So a typical three-bedroom house, purchased for \$200,000, could require a total investment of upwards of \$450,000. An average restoration takes 12 to 15 months.

If your investment in the Tuscan fantasy is more short-term, Evans offers rentals that include more than 200 farmhouses, villas, and apartments, priced from \$1,200 to \$17,000 (for a villa that sleeps 22) per week. Or skip the overseas journey altogether and shop for handcrafted Tuscan imports in his warmly decorated showroom in downtown Princeton, New Jersey. Among the products on offer, from small or family-run businesses: a peppery olive oil from a limited production of 400 bottles, L'Erbolario cosmetics, Deruta ceramics, wrought-iron furniture from Caporali, Busatti linens, Venini art glass, and Arnolfo di Cambio crystal.