



# Living the Tuscan idyll

It may have taken 20 years to restore, but this enchanting hilltop property is now a welcoming home loved by the whole Tully family.

Let me conjure you up an Arcadian image. You're standing. Glass of Chianti in hand gazing out over a swathe of sun-drenched landscape - terraces with ancient olive trees and cypresses stretch as far as the eye can see. A warm, brown stone farmhouse nestles invitingly in the folds of the hill, and it's yours.

It's the classic British fantasy of Tuscany and countless dreamers fall in love with the idea every year. In fact Italians simply call all infatuated foreigners 'inglese'. Nigel Tully however is one of the lucky few who have managed to make that dream a reality, and after 20 years, the Tuscan magic of his ancient farmhouse remains untarnished.



**Above:** The house and loggia, with warning tower, and a cottage to the right, in autumn.

**Left:** The sitting area by the log fire, with the kitchen in the background.

**Above right:** View from the back terrace of Ripertoli's nearest neighbours 'Le Galle' and 'Colognole'.

**Right:** The loggia, protecting the entrance to the old wine cellar.

Nigel, a musician and businessman, fell in love with Italy as so many young men throughout history have done, when he was still at Oxford. He always knew he would want his own little piece of paradise there, and after many years of searching, he found it at Ripertoli, an estate on the outskirts of Greve.

The property was far bigger and more expensive than anything he'd previously considered. In addition to the main house, there are two cottages and 40 acres of land, but love at first sight is not a rational animal, and that's exactly what this was. Over the intervening years it's proved a wise choice and is now a cherished family home.

Ripertoli is over 1000 years old, originally one of a chain of beacon or warning towers strung across this region, where in turbulent mediaeval times feuding and political unrest were rife, and attack an ever present and very real possibility.

'It was never a grand house,' Nigel explains, unlike Sieneese or Florentine villas. It was a farm, and not a very efficient one either - the steep terrain meant terracing and dry stone walls had to be constantly built and repaired to make cultivation possible.' Now of course, those same features are part of the glory of the place and Nigel is understandably proud of the careful restoration work which, in partnership with wonderful local builders, is an ongoing process on the estate.

The main house is spacious and inside its solid stone walls are painted white. Deeply recessed windows have interior and exterior shutters but no curtains, to maximise light. Bare wooden ceilings and stone floors strewn with rugs



keep things traditional, while in the huge open-plan living area, comfortable cushioned sofas grouped around the focus of a wood fire hint at cosy evenings in autumn - at an altitude of 500 metres, there's even the occasional frost.

At the other end of this space is the kitchen, with marble worktops and original stone sink, where marvellous aromatic meals using fresh local produce and Ripertoli's own olive oil ("It's the best in the world," declares Nigel) are prepared and served on distinctive Florentine pottery. These are enjoyed at a long table, or more often than not, outside on the terrace overlooking the valley. Here you sit at a beautiful marble table balanced on stone pillars, discovered in Vicenza.

In fact, much of life is lived outdoors during the long, hot summer days. There's a pool, of course, and 25 acres of woodland - chestnuts, oaks, Judas trees - to wander in. Deborah. Nigel's wife, is planning a wild flower meadow (not something the Tuscans can readily comprehend, as it won't be useful), and the couple has recently replanted 300 olive trees (now that, they do understand...). Handsome terracotta pots overflow with geraniums and roses and lavender and bay hedges are alive with the drowsy hum of bees.

But this is a house for all seasons, so throughout there's an easy compromise between authenticity and comfort. The wrought iron lamps are made locally but the armchairs are from Heal's; there are reclaimed terracotta floor tiles, but luxurious en suite bathrooms; rough-hewn roof timbers yet state-of-the-art low-voltage lighting tracks.

In a ground floor bedroom, an English artist who lives locally has painted delightful trompe-l'oeil drapes to frame a bedhead made from an old etching. On a side



**Left:** The main bedroom with a beautiful trompe l'oeil. The plain contrast cotton quilt on the bed is from [www.armoirelinen.com](http://www.armoirelinen.com) Te: 0870 850 5775.

**Right:** A cottage bedroom, with locally-made wrought-iron bed frames. The two blue and white Toile de Jouy quilts are from Interior Affairs, Tel: 01243 389972 or visit [www.interioraffairs.co.uk](http://www.interioraffairs.co.uk)



table in the lovely airy salotto stands a model of the Duomo in Siena, and these little touches of individuality somehow mark the affection in which the house is held. Nigel knows that the Tuscans running the estate with him love the place much as he does; many of them have lived nearby all their lives and are fiercely protective of it.

The practicalities of 21st Century living, such as overhead cables and telephone wires may be necessary evils, but they make unwelcome additions to the spectacular landscape.

#### ESSENTIAL READING

If you're thinking seriously about making your dream come true, getting hold of a copy of "Buying a house in Italy" by Gordon Neale (published by Vacation Work £11.95) is a good place to start. Its full of advice about all aspects of the process, from choosing the right region for you to registering with a doctor.

The Tullys have made it a priority that as soon as they could afford it (and obtain the convoluted planning permissions), they should have the pylons dismantled and the cables buried. Now at last this is completed and the valley looks once again much as it must have done for hundreds of years. Even the ecologically-sound solar panels around the swimming pool are hidden behind hedges of ivy and jasmine - no compromises there.

A vital part of the couples sense of belonging at Ripertoli is certainly due to the enthusiasm with which they enter into local life, working with and valuing craftspeople and artisans, speaking the language fluently and supporting the local shops and markets, but Nigel believes it's his music which has been the real key to unlocking the hearts of the local people.

"Italians love nothing better than a party," he says with a chuckle, and his rock band The Dark Blues' are such a hit locally that they were asked to open the festivities at the Greve- in-Chianti Festa del Vino!

**Above left:** The salotto, or living room, with Heal's armchairs.

**Above:** A beautiful painted Florentine mirror and table in the salotto.



Italy Is a country whose idiosyncrasies are part of its charm. Did you know that there are 11 different winds which can blow through the olive trees, from the cold bora to the hot, gritty ostro? Or that it's perfectly normal to call in a water diviner or rabdomante to establish whether you have a satisfactory supply on your land? (This happened at Ripertoli). And that, although this is the most Catholic of nations, only a fraction of the population go regularly to Mass? Maybe this last fact has something to do with the traditional old Puglian saying that 'a barrelful of wine works more miracles than a churchful of saints'...But despite the anomalies (and occasional frustrations), it's clear that the lure of this beautiful, romantic country is as strong as ever for the sun-starved anglosassone; for lucky Nigel and Deborah, dividing their time between Ripertoli and England, the best of both worlds is a real way of life.

Ripertoli is available to rent. If you're interested, the contact details are [nigeltully@darkblues.co.uk](mailto:nigeltully@darkblues.co.uk)

**Left** Candlelit dinner on the marble table on the terrace

**NIGEL TULLY OFFERS A FEW TIPS BASED ON HIS 20 YEARS AT RIPERTOLI:**

- Use the local craftspeople/ builders - don't risk alienating people from the start by bringing in expertise or materials from the UK. Establish a mutual trust and you will reap the rewards in loyalty.
- Remember you will be hugely dependent on the skills and support of local suppliers - more so than if you bought a second home in Britain, because of the differences in practice, language subtleties and local knowledge. Keep in with your craftspeople and builders and accept their advice - they're likely to be right, and 100% trustworthy.
- When you find people who work well for you, let them know how much you value this - pay your bills promptly, don't query amounts unless a mistake has been made, and make it clear you depend on them. if you should experience bad service, discreetly let other suppliers know that you will not be using this particular firm again, and why. In a small community this strategy soon works.
- At Ripertoli, there is a part time staff of five who have responsibilities to maintain and tend the house and grounds, but good

relationships with local plumbers, electricians and tradespeople are also invaluable when a problem arises.

- A friendly bank manager or surveyor to help with bureaucracy is a very useful asset.
- Don't be tempted into trying to bribe anyone - the legendary Italian 'brown envelope' practice is sternly discouraged in Tuscany, and the only helpful commodity where planning or other consents are needed is patience!
- If you can, give something back to the community - not many of us can provide a rock band and live music as a 'thank you', but a willingness to be involved, an interest in local history and even an attempt to understand politics will soon endear you to your new compatriots.

