

Altitude adjustment

Converted 'rustici' offer affordable charm in the Swiss Alps, writes Haig Simonian

Not everyone can afford millions of euros for a home in Ticino. And not everyone wants the responsibilities of ageing infrastructure and extensive gardens that a classic lakeside villa can entail.

So for buyers keen on the region but with more modest means or differing tastes, there is the *rustico*. All over Ticino – but particularly in high valleys such as the Valle Maggia above Locarno – the landscape is dotted with modest former farm buildings converted into holiday homes.

The typical *rustico* is square or rectangular, providing no more than 36 sq metres of space on each of its two floors. Historically, the lower area was reserved for livestock while the upper floor stored hay or grain. Often the buildings were built in small groups as peasant farmers helped each other with construction and access paths.

With many dating back to 1600 or 1700, the *rustici* are landmarks in an area of valleys and small, dark stone villages dominated by tall church towers. Often grouped just outside a village, and sometimes more centrally located, they are also scattered around the less hospitable hillsides.

"As alpine farming declined and people left the valleys for the towns, *rustici* became vacant and increasingly derelict," explains Arnaldo Coduri, director of economics at the canton's finance and economics administration and a *rustico* owner himself. "We have catalogued about 10,000 such buildings, of which 20 per cent have been deemed worthy of preservation with the potential to be converted into holiday homes. For the canton, preserving *rustici* is important for local economies, the environment and as part of our cultural heritage."

To that end, the canton will subsidise up to 30 per cent of the renovation costs for the properties in defined regions, to a maximum of SFr180,000 (£92,000). The grants include furniture but few owners have taken up the offer as it requires a 15-year commitment to make the properties available for holiday rental for five months a year.

Conversions take many forms. The simplest are only accessible on foot and provide basic cooking and living facilities but little else. In other cases, renovation can be elaborate and combine a building's intrinsic granite and larch with more modern materials to create an eye-catching mix.

Giovan Luigi Dazio, a 60-year old local architect from Fusio, has pioneered many such conversions. Hailing from the last village in the Val Lavizzara, one of the two valleys into which the Valle Maggia branches, he has spent much of the past 30 years preserving what he calls the "soul" of



the region. "A *rustico* is more than a retreat in beautiful mountain scenery. It offers a chance to break away from hectic urban life and make time stop," he says.

His focus has been on Fusio and Mogno, the village just to the south that was put on the map after contemporary architect Mario Botta designed a chapel to replace the church washed away by a landslide in 1986.



£500,000 will buy three small 'rustici' in need of conversion

The Botta building, a characteristic work of curves and stripped stone, has become a place of pilgrimage for architecture aficionados and has assisted in the region's revival.

"Strict preservation laws limit what can be done to *rustici* externally," Dazio explains. He points out the painstaking

wood-and-stone workmanship that has allowed so many of the buildings to survive in such a tough climate. The steep, pitched rafters, made of durable local larch, were designed to bear the weight of heavy granite tiles. With each of the roofing stones up to 4 cm thick, the typical roof of a *rustico* can weigh 380kg per sq metre – astonishingly heavy but also durable and stable.

Zoning rules limit conversions of *rustici* outside prescribed residential areas, although the canton is locked in a complex battle with the Swiss federal government to have such dwellings incorporated. But, while the regulations limit the architect's scope when it comes to exteriors and windows, there are conspicuous exceptions, for example where former stone walls have been replaced by dramatic panels of plate glass.

Inside, the architect has a much freer hand. At the Casa Rocco in Fusio, for example, a building dating back to about 1600, Dazio has incorporated two apartments and a top-floor studio in the tall, narrow, frame. The renovation includes modern kitchens and showers, all completed in a minimalist style, with gleaming white surfaces and traditional stone floors.

Heritage
Converted *rustici* in Fusio, above, and Mogno, right

Many include telephone and internet access, alongside basics such as power and hot and cold running water. But few would pretend *rustici* are year-round dwellings. The two sitting rooms in the Casa Rocco, for example, retain their original panelled walls and offer rustic beauty but combined with a small original window make for a gloomy environment during much of the day.

Similarly, the restricted space dictated by a *rustico*'s original functions limits how many people can stay in it at one time and how long they might want to linger indoors. Such constraints, and the fact that *rustici* valleys rise to 1,000 metres or more, making them inhospitable for all but the most hardy in winter, mean they remain a seasonal investment.

"Most people buy for the summer months," confirms Fabio Lafranchi, head of the tourist office in the Valle Maggia, where *rustici* account for about 75 per cent of the 2,200 holiday homes registered. "Ownership has risen steadily in the past 10 years, which in turn has boosted demand. People come specifically to spend a holiday in a *rustico*, meaning we have trouble meeting demand in July and August."

About half the owners are from Ticino, while Swiss-Germans comprise a substantial proportion of the remainder. But people from further afield have also been buying. "What tends to distinguish purchasers is an interest in nature, culture and possibly architecture," Dazio says. Many come primarily to hike in the unspoiled surroundings – the Valle Maggia alone spends SFr5,000,000 a year maintaining hiking trails.

Prices for *rustici* can be very modest and most local estate agents have one or two on their books. Dazio, who sells directly, is more upmarket. "Prices depend on size, materials and location. But I should say SFr400,000-450,000 would get you a good *rustico*," he says.

Sometimes Dazio works as both architect and developer. More often he advises buyers and undertakes the conversion. At best, the work can take about a year from purchase to completion, he says. "Often I have clients who want to be involved. One of the most important aspects of converting a *rustico* is to personalise it."

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