



Village Renovations

For 25 years Tom and Tina had been coming to Corfu. Each year they rented a room and a car for a few weeks and explored the island until they knew every village and beach. Like so many of us they were in love with this green paradise.

By John Waller

Every month they would buy the excellent English language paper, *The Corfiot*. They would view the properties on its list and then they hit a problem: not the price as, from GBP 30,000 for a village house in need of repair to GBP 120,000 for a new three-bedroom house in a development

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of four, it was within their budget.

“That village house was just what we want,” said Tina, the romantic one. “That old lady next door was really friendly; she gave us a bunch of grapes.”

“But who would do it up?” replied Tom, the practical one, “It needs a new roof.”

“I’m sure we could get the local builder to do it and that would bring money into the village. And we would make new friends!”

“But we could just walk into the new house we saw. It’s in olive groves, which we both like, and the neighbours would check it’s alright when we are away.”

“You couldn’t walk to a little shop to get your groceries and make more friends. Anyway, our Greek friends would make sure nothing happened when we are in England.”

In the end they agreed to defer the decision for another year. Eventually their friend Jim found them a compromise: an old village house which had been restored. For GBP 110,000 they bought a beautifully renovated four-bedroom, two-bathroom gem overlooking the countryside.

Tina was happy. With her very limited Greek, she made friends with her neighbours with their non-existent English. Tom was happy. At breakfast he could sit on the balcony and look at the olive groves and the neighbouring villages nearby and the mountains in the distance. But Jim was unhappy.

“You come and sit on my veranda and look out to sea, but you never ask me to sit on yours with its beautiful view.”

“But it’s only one metre wide,”

replied Tina.

“Then widen it,” said Jim.

“But we’d need planning permission,” argued Tom.

“Not if your neighbours are your friends,” claimed Jim. “I’ll ask Pavlos, my engineer.”

Now Pavlos is an expert. He built Jim’s road up the mountain and renovated their 30 year-old summerhouse and then added a pool and 35-square-metre veranda.

“You must be careful,” said Pavlos. “You remember the story I told about a pool I designed in Lefkimmi. The permission was a month late. I go down to tell my client so he could start work, but what do I find? He has completed the pool. I tell him that if the police had seen it, we would both be in prison. Next day, the police do turn up and ask for his permit. He tells them I have it in town, so they visit me. They look at the date and ask me how come it’s taken the client only a day to build his pool. ‘It’s a miracle!’ I tell the police.”

Pavlos suggested Jim cleared it with one of his friends, the village councillor, who saw no problem.

Now there are three things one needs to know about Greek building. First, the builder frequently uses the word *avrio* – tomorrow. But *avrio* never comes. Secondly, nothing is ever done when the client is away. Finally, Greeks are very proud people; with good motivation, they will actually deliver on time – even if it means working round the clock for the last week. Just remember the Athens Olympics. Jim had invited all the workers and their partners to a victory party on

Corfu sketches



completion of his project. Other than the fact the food was delivered a day early and the men thought partner meant family, the celebration was reward for a great success.

For the faint-hearted or those who must spend time away, there are now organisations on the island that specialise in managing the renovation, from checking ownership, getting planning permission to moving in, with future maintenance on offer as well. The best advice for the brave is to get a good local engineer who has experience of renovation work. Village property owning is now a real possibility. But why go down the village renovation route?

Most villages have empty property. The young people have moved to Corfu Town and newcomers are welcomed as they help keep the village alive, the mini-market open and the grill room busy. Wander through the alleyways under a bright moon in the cool of the evening to pick up a take-away or sit outside in the street eating succulent meat and salad and drinking the local plonk: that's life. Walk the paths from the village through the olive groves as people have done for centuries. Join the village Philharmonic – the brass band which leads processions over Easter and on Saints' days – or, if you cannot blow a horn or beat a drum, just walk with the villagers. In our village we have a folk museum; become involved.

Corfu is blessed with gorgeous villages –

104 in total, some are vibrant whilst others are nearly derelict. Many are linked by bus to Corfu Town, the hub and jewel of the island and now a World Heritage Site.

In the shops later this month will be a truly remarkable new book: Theresa Nicholas's Corfu Sketches – A thirty-year journey. It contains over 200 sketches and shows a magical Corfu, its town and villages, as seen through the eyes of an artist who has lived on the island since 1961. In the World Heritage Site the sketches are grouped into five walks: along the Tourist Trail; through the Venetian Old Town to the Mourayia, the sea walls; to the Jewish Quarter and its synagogue; up the hill to the smart end of town and via the Old Port to the market. Another section portrays the Easter parade.

The Old Town consists of a labyrinth of narrow alleys between four-storey residencies with the day's washing drying on lines above. In the heart of this romantic area is the Durrell School with its library, monthly lectures and bi-annual symposiums. It focuses on the two brothers who were raised on the island in the 1930s: Gerald with his life's work in saving endangered species and writing – My Family and Other Animals – and Lawrence, the great classical author.

For the property hunter the second half of the book is more interesting. It describes 30 villages. In style, Corfu villages are fairly similar: a central square, plateia; a church

with a beautiful bell-tower, and narrow alleyways seen through ornate arches. Theresa's sketches bring out their remarkable architecture. At the end of the book, she has captured on paper thirty years of village life so one can meet their people and see the work they do. Use the book to find the most idyllic village and in your tour look carefully, little has changed

But Corfu is not the same as much of Greece; indeed, many would say that in mid summer it is not Greece at all. So please read a village renovation story which is about the real Greece: Roy Hounsell's The Papas and the Englishman – From Corfu to Zagoria.

In 1991 the great philhellene and travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor was asked, "If you wanted to go somewhere – somewhere right off the map, with no tourists or modern developments – where would you go?" He replied, "Epirus – the north, the mountains. You might have a chance of finding places there." It was in 1991 that Roy and Effie Hounsell moved into their place in Zagoria.

In 1980, having been made redundant, Roy and Effie left England to try their hand at establishing themselves in Corfu. They visited mountainous Zagoria in northern mainland Greece and were captivated by its magnificent, rugged beauty and its mouldering, unspoiled stone villages. All desire to move there was dashed by their

poor ability to speak Greek. Eventually they bought a tumbledown property in Koukouli. They struggled with the rebuilding, helped by the village priest, Papa Kostas, created a garden out of the jungle and joined in with the villagers to become regarded as locals.

Marc Dubin, co-author of the Rough Guide to Greece, perfectly described the book:

"What makes this different from other 'No Going Back' sagas is how the authors have engaged with their neighbours and helped keep an isolated community alive."

If you love Greece and wish to keep it from overdevelopment, then before buying that off-plan dream house in that olive grove, which one day will be overlooked by the other new-builds with their single olive tree to show it is still countryside, please look hard at renovating a village property. If you do, you will be rewarded by becoming truly part of Greece.

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John Waller's books Greek Walls – An Odyssey in Corfu and Corfu Sunset – Avrio Never Comes are available in all good bookshops.



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Paul Hounsell, who renovated the house in Koukouli in the mountains on the mainland and wrote The Papas and the Englishman, can be contacted on 0030 26530 71743.

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