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From Medieval Relic to Roman Haven



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

Meg and Chris Phillips, a couple from Austin, Tex., have a second home in this hilltop village called Casperia, which is located in the Lazio region of Italy about 40 miles north of Rome. [More Photos >](#)
By SHERMAKAYE BASS

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For most people, owning a centuries-old “appartamento” in a medieval Italian town is the stuff of dreams. For Chris and Meg Phillips of Austin, Tex., the fantasy has become reality.

[A Dream Home in Italy](#)

The couple shared a love for Italy dating to their college days. After making annual visits between 2000 and 2004, Chris Phillips convinced his wife that they should buy. On their first official shopping trip, in November 2004, they visited Casperia, a hilltop hamlet 40 miles north of Rome, and fell in love with the shell of a place — crumbling stone walls, antiquated beams and all.

When the couple saw the hills, the ancient narrow streets of Casperia (no cars allowed; few would fit) and the view of the town from the property, they were sold. Within 24 hours they had put in an offer and met with the husband-and-wife architecture team of Conti_Rowland Architetti. The

Umbria-based team was recommended by Johannes Hermel and Luisa Biaocco-Hermel, who run a real estate agency and www.casambiente.com, where the Phillipses first found the property.

Exactly two years later, the couple are owners of Il Sogno, Italian for the dream. “It was a hovel, really — a wonderful hovel,” said Mr. Phillips, a 59-year-old lawyer, who is thrilled that his wife overcame her objections. Nowadays, when the couple are not using the house, their four adult children are — or it is being rented out.

Before her change of heart, Ms. Phillips, 59, who teaches private school, says she remembers thinking: “Oh, come on! We don’t need a second home in Italy.”

“I’d always thought we would travel when we retired,” she added, “and I didn’t want to be limited to one place. I thought buying a house, not just in Italy, but anywhere, would do that.”

But when the Phillipses wound their way up the Via Mazzini in Casperia, they felt breathless with anticipation — partly because of the 220-odd steps they had had to climb and partly because, when they stepped across the threshold of No. 26, “it felt like we were coming home,” Mr. Phillips said.

Home, at that time, was two levels of ancient stone and dirt, shards of undated pottery, a hidden (and, thankfully, long-unused) toilet outflow and walls that needed plaster. From all that, their builder, Stefano Fagiani, fashioned a living room, dining room, kitchen and master bedroom suite, and, downstairs, a guest room and a second bathroom, all totaling a little more than 110 square meters, or 1,200 square feet.

Early on in the process, Mr. Fagiani deduced that in the 12th century, the lower floor had been used to store food; he believes an ancient “cisterna” uncovered during construction was once a communal olive-oil vat. The second level (the couple bought the whole thing from the same owner, who owns the apartment above Il Sogno) was a 15th-century addition. While working on the kitchen, Mr. Fagiani also found remnants of an ancient stoop and what he suspected was an early road, possibly Roman. The Phillipses’ need for a kitchen outweighed their fascination with the past, but

not before the find was documented for what eventually became a privately published book, “Restoring Il Sogno.”

“Apparently that sort of thing happens all the time in Italy,” said Mr. Phillips, noting that the village’s origins also are somewhat obscure. “I don’t think anyone really knows how long Casperia has been there. Virgil mentions a town in his writings that some people think is modern Casperia.”

One thing is certain: Il Sogno’s structure is part of a classic “borgo,” an ancient combination of houses, shops and even stables, built and rebuilt over many centuries, creating a plaster-stone-dirt continuum that can stretch for blocks.

Some surprises were not so pleasant. The Casperia commune council refused their request to build a balcony off the master bedroom, something that Mrs. Phillips in particular had set her heart on.

And last spring their neighbor and caretaker told them that there was a two-inch layer of mold forming on the apartment walls, endangering the antiques and valuable textiles that the Phillipses had started moving into the house.

Apparently moisture from the curing plaster had created the hazard, which fortunately was dealt with by repeated airing and the addition of shutters on the windows. The couple said it was the only problem that had truly challenged language barriers and spotty communication between Texas and Italy.

And despite such issues, they said, they love the house and look forward to retiring in four or five years, when they will split their time between their American and Italian homes.

In the last two years, Casperia has begun to attract more outsiders and expatriates, pushing up prices. Mr. Hermel, the Phillipses’ real estate agent, said the cost of property in the city’s oldest section had increased by 30 percent since late 2004. He estimates that, per square meter, a renovated space would sell for 2,000 euros to 2,500 euros, or \$2,620 to \$3,275, and a “fixer-upper” for 800 euros to 1,200 euros, or \$1,050 to \$1,570.

Andrew Rowland, the English half of the Conti_Rowland architectural team, thinks the Phillipses made a great find. He and his wife, Olimpia Conti, work frequently with Americans who want to restore homes in Italy. “I think Americans in particular like to restore, even if the restoration in some cases is quite extreme,” Mr. Rowland said. “They like to buy something as wrecked as possible. Emotionally, most of the Americans want to get into the history, to see the bricks and stone, the age. Maybe they want to come back to their roots in some way.”





Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

Casperia, a hilltop hamlet 40 miles north of Rome, where Meg and Chris Phillips of Austin, Tex., have a second home.



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The Phillipses bought the house two years ago. They named it "Il Sogno," Italian for the dream.



Courtesy of Chris and Meg Phillips



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

After two years of work, the renovated living room.



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

The couple retained as much of the original stonework as possible.



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

The master bedroom. The builder believes this part of the house was built in the 15th century.



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

The bathroom in the master bedroom suite.



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

According to the builder, the lower level of the house was probably built in the 12th century



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

The lower level may have been used originally for food storage; the builder thinks an ancient cistern may have been a communal olive-oil vat.



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

The guest bedroom. Its walls have much of the original stonework.



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

The kitchen. While working on this part of the house, the builder found evidence of what he believes was a Roman road.



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

In addition to the house itself, the Phillipses love the views of the Italian countryside.