

HOMEFINDER ABROAD

Caroline and Dave Lewis quit Northern Ireland for sunnier climes. They are delighted with the move as **Jane Hardy** reports

Spain really hits all the right notes

IN spite of the Spanish second home wobble a while back, there are areas in this large country that have maintained their value and continue to prove very popular with UK buyers.

The high end market, in particular, remains buoyant — and offers the classy Iberian lifestyle most of us only dream about. Caroline and Dave Lewis made the dream a reality 10 months ago when they quit Northern Ireland for Monte Pego on the northern Costa Blanca, halfway between Alicante and Valencia.

It's a special place and had attracted musician Dave (49) and his wife Caroline (47), who now works on exhibitions publicising the development, for a while. Caroline said: "It's surrounded by vineyards and orange groves, 10 minutes from the nearest sandy beach. There's a real buzz about where we live."

There is also 70% occupancy in Monte Pego, unlike the situation in some second home-dominated towns in Spain.

She said: "We used to drive past it. I thought it looked lovely with all the white houses, but was probably inhabited by retired people."

In fact, there is a lot going on, and a considerable arts scene, with a theatre being built and a new art gallery to showcase the undiscovered artists of the region.

This suits singer-songwriter Dave Lewis to a tee. He has started a residency at the local Marriott five-star hotel in nearby Denia. He even has plans for a Ronnie Scott-style jazz club in their town. The story of how the Lewis's got together and came to Spain is rather romantic. Dave had known Caroline for over 20 years.

He said: "We met in England and would bump into each other from time to time. I had a residency in London at Smollensky's in the Strand, so I didn't lose touch with friends."

When Dave came home to Northern Ireland to look after his mother six years ago, he decided one evening as he glanced through his contacts book to phone Caroline in Madrid, where



Bella vista: nothing to do but admire the view

she was working in events for the British Embassy.

"Weirdly her mother had passed away two days before and she said she had been thinking of me too. She asked me to go out to visit her so I started flying out and romance blossomed."

Caroline moved to Belfast to be with Dave and the couple built up a business doing weddings and corporate events.

Dave continued: "When my mother died, we decided to go to Spain, where Caroline's heart is. We'd worked with bookings a year in advance and had to start cancelling everything from January 1 this year which was nerve-racking."

They sold their "nice" house in Bangor and headed for Monte Pego. They now live in a white villa, just like the ones Caroline

had fancied for so long, right in the centre of the small town.

Dave revealed: "There are a lot of successful people here with interesting backgrounds who leave you in peace when you want. It's very international with Swiss, French and English owners — as well as Spaniards."

The Monte Pego property company is part of a traditional family business that has been established for 48 years.

UK operations director Peter Mustafa outlined one of the factors that makes this community unique. He said: "90% of our new buyers are buying to live here permanently, yet we don't target that audience."

They don't need to, seemingly; the way of life sells itself. Three-bedroom villas cost from around £191,000 and apartments, which will be constructed at a height of two storeys, will be around £140,000. You can pay more for a property with a pool and the Casa Maita is £285,000, but for the well-heeled £353,000 buys a five-bedroom, three-bathroom villa.

The reason that this market is stable, according to Peter, is that "people are making a commitment based on lifestyle rather than investors buying off-plan to

sell without ever intending to see the project through to completion".

So, as Dave and Caroline have discovered, this suburb of Pego village is not a dead community. In fact, a new social club is being started and there's going to be an 18-hole golf course in the foothills of the mountain. Peter added: "The senior directors of the company live in Monte Pego with their families, which is unheard of."

Financially, there is good news for investors here since land prices are still rising and once you have bought, your investment will be going up in value. Confidence in Juan Posellanes's company is such that they tell potential buyers on viewing flights to leave their cheque books at home and fix the property prices once a buyer has selected his or her villa.

If Monte Pego sounds almost too good to be true, that's cynical. They don't need to market it hard, but everyone, it seems, wants a piece of this traditional Spanish action.

Tel (020) 8920 9414 or visit the Monte Pego exhibitions on 3 and 4 November (10am - 6 pm) at The Old Inn, Crawfordsburn.



Cool casa: a Spanish suntrap

IN BRIEF

Oceanico, here we go

ONE of Northern Ireland's leading estate agents, BTWShiels, is celebrating being named official agents in the province for the residential developments of Portuguese property group Oceanico. The group specialises in golf and beach resorts, and recently acquired five golf courses at Vilamoura in the Algarve. They are also developing two new Championship courses at its resort in Amendeira which were designed by legendary golfers Nick Faldo and Christy O'Connor Junior.

Sarah Cole of BTWShiels said: "This is a great opportunity for us to represent one of the most prestigious developers in the region. The Oceanico group has a growing reputation for quality design and fittings, plus space and family-oriented facilities."

Colleague Stuart Pollin added: "Having visited each of the sites myself, I can confirm they are prime locations and I have confidence in the product that Oceanico are offering. Prices range from €500,000 to €2,500,000."

Two brand new schemes were launched last weekend at dual events running in Belfast and Dublin — the five-star Royal Obidos Spa and Golf Resort, which is just an hour's drive north of Lisbon, with a Sever Ballesteros designed golf course, and the Vilamoura Golf and Garden Resort in the Algarve.

For more information on these developments, contact BTWShiels on 028 9066 6888.

La really dolce vita

THERE is top end property and then there is the top end Italian market around areas such as Lake Como and Lake Garda.

Linda Travella of casa Travella, who has just finished filming for the new series of A Place in the Sun when she was on Lake Como setting her binoculars on gorgeous villas belonging to George Clooney and Signor Berlusconi, said: "Although the last couple of years has seen a growth in interest in emerging countries such as Croatia, clients wanting to invest larger amounts of money are turning to the traditional, stable markets which have good infrastructure and culture."

"They're looking for the good things in life and Italy has that in abundance."

So, for just under £700,000, you could own a five-bedroom home in Western Liguria with a beautiful garden and swimming pool. For more information, telephone 01344 660988 or visit www.casatravella.com