

Nestled on the edge of the breathtaking Engadine valley, north of Lake Como, lies the medieval hilltop village of Pianazzola. It was here that keen mountaineers Richard and Lucy Pash were walking three years ago when a helpful barmaid pointed them in the direction of Casa dell'Ava, a lovely 300-year-old stone property with splendid mountain views.

Three months later the house was theirs, and they set about sensitively renovating and redecorating. Just before their first daughter was born in August 2004, the couple began to feel the pull towards family back in the UK. They made the difficult decision to return home, but couldn't bear to part with Casa dell'Ava. Now based in Wiltshire, they rent it out to holiday-makers and return as often as they can.

THE ITALIAN MAGAZINE: *Why did you decide to move to Italy?*

RICHARD PASH: Well, I think it all started because of our love of the mountains. We are keen skiers and mountaineers and our passion for climbing had taken us all over the world. We had also spent several winters working in the Alps, working as ski guides and running chalets. In 2001 I was offered a job in Milan, and we both jumped at the chance. Soon after arriving, we fell in love with the hills around Lake Como and

CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN

Mountaineers Richard and Lucy Pash spent three happy years in the Italian Alps. Richard speaks to **Rebecca Chappell** about climbing, renovating and their decision to return to the UK in 2004

MEET THE READERS



NAMES: Richard and Lucy Pash and their daughters Emily and Sophie.

AGES: Richard and Lucy are both 33, Emily is two and Sophie is nine months.

WHERE? Wilton in Wiltshire after living for three years in the Engadine valley in Italy.

OCCUPATION: Richard is a Marketing Manager and Lucy is a full-time mum.

CONTACT: To book Casa dell'Ava for a holiday, visit www.holidaylettings.co.uk/rentals/chivenna/16033 or call Holiday Lettings on 01865 201444. Richard and Lucy can be contacted on 01672 870665.

spent a lot of time walking there – its an area larger than the Lake District, but with a fraction of the walkers.

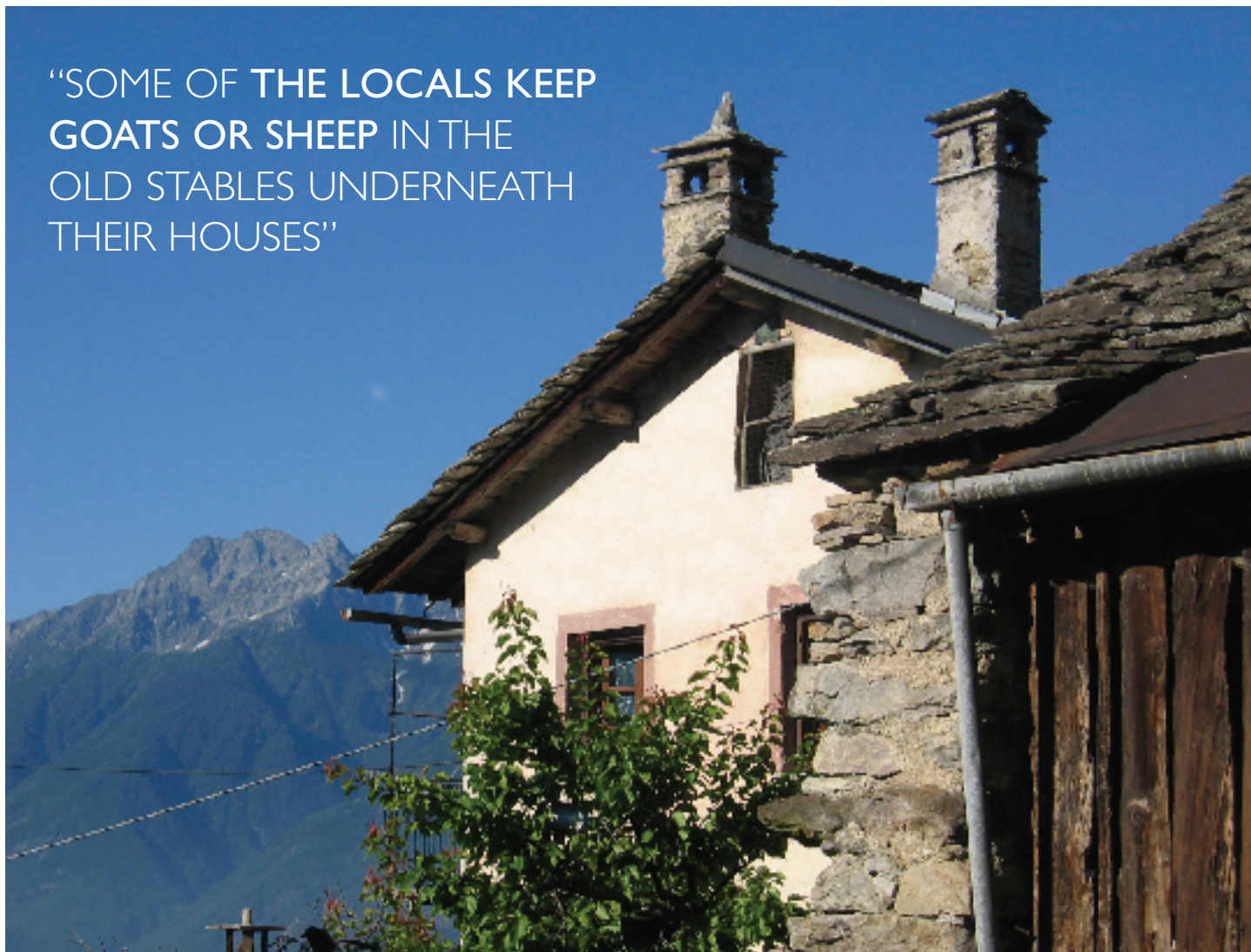
TIM: *How did you go about finding your chalet? Was it a very long search?*

RP: Our house is in a mountain village called Pianazzola, and on an autumn walk there three years ago, we stopped for a picnic. After lunch we popped into a bar for a coffee. I say a bar, but it was actually part of a lady called Corrina's house and she had invited us into her kitchen. We got talking to her about the village. We had been looking for a house in the valley, but we hadn't found anything right, and we asked her if she knew anything for sale. Clearly asking the barmaid is the best way to find a house in Italy, because ten minutes later we were opening the door of what would soon be our home!

TIM: *What do you love about the area?*

RP: We think it has some of the most beautiful scenery in the Alps. There are many unspoilt medieval mountain »

“SOME OF THE LOCALS KEEP GOATS OR SHEEP IN THE OLD STABLES UNDERNEATH THEIR HOUSES”



Previous page: The Pash's 300-year-old home which they found while hiking in the Lombardy Alps

Above: The house enjoys stunning views of the surrounding mountains **Opposite:** Charming period detail was retained during the renovation

villages in the valleys, surrounded by alpine meadows, and linked by ancient cobbled paths. Somehow this area has remained away from the main tourist trails, and exploring it is like stepping back in time.

We're both huge fans of Italy, and in true Italian style the food here is outstanding. There are many excellent family-run restaurants with interesting local menus and great wine lists. We also love going to a *rifugio* for lunch. There's a network of these inns high up in the mountains. You can only reach them by foot, but despite the position, you can sample their homemade wine, excellent dishes like game stew and maybe roast a chestnut or two on the fire.

TIM: Describe your property.

RP: Casa dell'Ava is a 300-year-old mountain home, with three foot thick stone walls and a granite staircase, cupboards tucked into niches in the wall, and old doors with giant iron keys. There are about 60 stone-built houses, and while you can reach the village by car, you can only enter on foot, which makes it a peaceful spot. It sits on a south facing hill above a large zone of vineyards and below there's a large deciduous forest. Although it is less common nowadays, some of the locals keep goats or sheep in the stables under their houses.

TIM: Did you have to do much work on the property?

RP: We completely restored the house with new windows and doors, a new kitchen and bathroom, new heating and hot water! We wanted to renovate in an environmentally friendly way, so heating and hot water is provided using a stove that runs on recycled paper pellets. All electricity for the house is provided from hydroelectric schemes via an electricity co-op run from the local town.

We took care to preserve original features of the house, such as uncovering a lovely granite staircase and restoring an antique chestnut floor. Traditionally, different pastel colours were used to decorate homes here, and we have interpreted this in a modern way. We are planning to restore the roof, terrace and walls too. These are all major projects and will be only completed once we have raised money for the work.

TIM: Could you speak the language?

RP: When I arrived in Italy our Italian amounted to a cheery "ciao", but over the years my Italian has improved, thanks to the patience of friends, teachers and a trusty CD. Restoring the house however was like learning a new language, and I was lucky that our Italian builders were so patient! I think they were quite interested in our 'green'

ideas for restoring the house, so maybe that helped, as I struggled for the Italian for 'stopcock' or 'extractor fan'!

TIM: Why did you decide to move back to the UK?

RP: It was a very tough decision. By 2004 we had had our first daughter Emily. Like our Italian friends, family is very important to us and has become even more so after Emily's arrival. We wanted her to be close to her grandparents, aunts and uncles.

TIM: What made you decide to set up a business in Italy. How have you found it?

RP: We weren't intending to start a business, but we realised we needed an income to pay for the house that we bought and all the work we had to do. And we were happy that other people could enjoy staying there – we think it is an experience you won't find elsewhere. We're only a guesthouse, but we try to be as environmentally friendly as possible and we donate five per cent of our income to Orobic National Park, one of four nature reserves in our area. We have been delighted that other people appreciated what we are doing and a lot of the interest in the house has come from our 'responsible' approach to tourism.

TIM: What have been the main challenges? In hindsight would you have done anything differently?

RP: We have been very lucky with the house and the whole process was pretty smooth, so not really! It's been much easier than all the horror stories you read about.

TIM: What are the differences between life in Italy and in the UK?

RP: There's a lot more sunshine in Italy! Engadina gets 320 days of sunshine a year, so on a rainy autumn day in Britain, it's probably clear blue skies and sunshine there! It seems inconceivable that a high mountain region could be so sunny, but it was the sun and pure mountain air that was partly what first attracted the tourists to the region 150 years ago.

Family and 'roots' seem to be more important in Italy than in the UK. The quality and taste of food has always been important to Italians while back in the UK we have only recently begun to question the source of ingredients. On the downside, there's more red tape to grapple with in Italy, and Italians can be preoccupied with their health.

TIM: What do you miss about Italy?

RP: Being so close to the mountains and all they have to offer. Eating out with the children, which is so much easier in Italy than England. Our friends and their laid back approach to life. Coffee and brioche in small cafes in the morning.

TIM: Do you return regularly? What do you do when you're there?

RP: Yes, five or six times a year. We're up early as our two small girls don't do lie-ins yet! We'll go down to Chiavenna and have a leisurely breakfast before heading for a stunning valley where we'll either picnic or eat in a *rifugio*. We'll return from our wanderings in the early evening and either relax at home or eat out with the children – Emily and Sophie seem to be doted on wherever they go! **TIM**

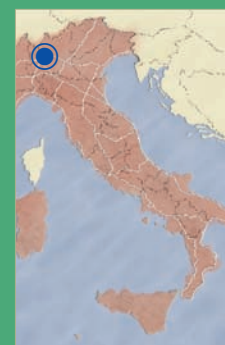


WHY BUY IN... LOMBARDY?

- Italy's most populous, richest and developed region, Lombardy is situated on the Swiss-Italian border and offers a huge diversity of landscapes, from its beautiful lakes and cultural hotspots, to peaceful medieval towns and the snow-capped peaks of the Alps.

- Property prices are high throughout Lombardy, particularly around Lake Como, where a three bedroom lakeside villa is worth around €475,000. But it's worth splashing out, as the area remains popular with both tourists and locals. Purchasers are likely to be able to rent out their property easily and, due to a stable market, can expect to see a good return on their investment.

- You won't go hungry! Lombardy is famous for their risotto, polenta, and the Christmas favourite, Panettone.



DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO TELL?

If you want your relocation story to appear in these pages, write to: *The Italian Magazine*, Merricks Media, 3-4 Riverside Court, Lower Bristol Road, Bath, BA2 3DZ, or email the editor at fred.dutton@merricksmedia.co.uk