

Cheap air travel means
for those who can afford
it, the British are
in St Lucia, as new holiday-
home destinations



MAKE THIS A WINTER OF CONTENT

Want to join the flocks of Britons who are investing in foreign bolt holes to escape our miserable weather? Susan Emmett tells you where to look

It is cold and grey outside, and we are all deep into post-party-season depression, but Mike and Janice Murphy will have none of all that. While the rest of us are piling on the extra layers and turning up the central heating, the couple from Barlow, in Derbyshire, will be toasting themselves by the pool in St Lucia, in the Caribbean.

Like the flocks of American and Canadian “snowbirds” who leave the frozen northeast and fly south to Florida each winter, the Murphys will be spending more than the usual two weeks at their former plantation house on the Cap Estate.

“We are planning to go out for at least a month, possibly more,” says Mike, 55, who owns MM Design, a graphicdesign company in Sheffield, with his wife, Janice, 52. “It takes at least a fortnight to settle down, unwind and adapt to a different pace of life. I have been grafting for 30 years, wondering what it’s all about. Now I know. After years of working under pressure and beating deadlines, we have acquired enough cash to give us the freedom to be able to spend months away.”

Buying a home abroad specifically to avoid the harshness of the British winter is proving increasingly popular, as the weakness of the dollar, cheap flights and fast internet access allow more people to make their money stretch further away from the tyranny of the office.

Mike says that many of his likeminded friends are doing the same thing this winter. “My parents would never have done this,” he says. “But I know a lot of people who realise life is too short, and don’t want to wait until they are retired to have time off.”

For the Murphys, buying the rundown property has also proved a good investment. Their villa was recently valued at £1.78m: 80% more than two years ago, when the refurbishment was completed. Although the house is not on the market, Mike confesses he could be tempted to sell up and start on a new project closer to home in the south of France.

The resorts of the French Riviera were the favourite winter retreats of the European aristocracy long before the days of cheap package holidays and lobster tans. Queen Victoria was among those advised by her doctor to flee the fog, cold and dampness, and spend some time in Nice in order to improve her health. Yet, while the Côte d'Azur remains popular, many of today's sunseekers go further afield in search of winter warmth. Marrakesh and Cyprus, for example, are also on the snowbird map, offering reliably sunny weather in winter, as well as relatively affordable property.

The Costa del Sol, in Spain, is still a year-round favourite. "It's a 12-month season now," says Barbara Wood, a director of The Property Finders, a firm of buying agents in southern

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Winter warmers

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price on Saturday by Stirling Sotheby's International Realty, in association with The British Homes Group. A week later, Stirling Sotheby's will auction 30 flats in New Smyrna Beach, on the Atlantic east coast, again with no reserve. Potential buyers can bid online (08000 518893, www.stirlingsir.com/auctions/preview.htm). Southern Spain is one of Britain's favourite year-round destinations, although you must be careful where you buy. The coast is generally warmer, and the further inland you go, the more the temperature drops, especially at night. In winter, temperatures range between 14C and 23C on the costas, but drop lower on the Costa de la Luz.

It is also cheap and easy to get to. There are about 30 flights a day into Malaga from a selection of UK airports. The journey takes about three hours.

For Simon and Penny Armitage, who live in Rutland, in the East Midlands, this was a key selling point. "We can leave our home in the UK at 5am and be sitting on our terrace by lunchtime. You can't do that if you buy further afield," says Simon, 51, a professional landlord. "Last February, I was sitting outside in the sunshine, with temperatures of about 24C. It was like an English summer day — one of the good ones."

The couple bought a plot of land at the Monte Mayor Golf & Country Club, a resort in the hills inland from Marbella, in March 2004 and built their own four-bed villa, with infinity pool. The house cost £894,000 and was ready at the end of 2006. The couple spent January and February there last year. It is a hit with their daughters, Lucy, 23, Kate, 22, and Sarah, 20, who have all left home, but enjoy spending time in Spain with their parents.

The Spanish market has taken a hit in the past year, especially on the costas, where there is an oversupply of new flats. This can be an opportunity for bargain hunters: haggle hard and you could knock 25% off the price.

Holiday homes in Spain come in all shapes, sizes and price brackets: £110,000 will buy you a flat in a high-density block in Torremolinos, but for a little more, you could get something much better. According to Barbara Wood, of The Property Finders (020 7518 0335, www.thepropertyfinders.com), a good two-bed flat on a golf course can be bought for less than £225,000. Experienced hagglers could also negotiate savings on three-bedroom villas priced between £330,000 and £370,000.

The towns between Malaga and Estepona are livelier in winter than other parts of the coast. “Go east of Malaga, towards Nerja, and you’ll see a big drop-off in activity, even though the weather is wonderful,” Wood says. The Côte d’Azur is known for its dry and sunny weather — though the temperature can go down to about 15C in winter.

Nice, Cannes and Monaco are year-round destinations, with most restaurants, shops and supermarkets open 12 months a year. Smaller towns such as St Tropez, Antibes and St Raphaël are quieter in winter, but remain busy with local residents.

Although prices are famously high, you can find a small city flat in Cannes or Nice for between £150,000 and £250,000. Attika International (00 33 4 93 16 95 81, www.attikainternational.com) is selling studios and one-bed flats in Nice from £98,000, if all you want is a place to sleep.

Anything a bit more special will cost you. A two-bedroom flat with sea views on the Promenade des Anglais, in Nice, carries a £553,000 price tag with Attika, which also has a fabulous villa in glitzy St-Jean-CapFerrat, on the market at £5.7m. That said, £369,000 would get you a Main picture: the Costa del Sol is one of the most popular winter destinations for Britons. The Armitage family, left, have a villa in the hills near Marbella three-bedroom villa with shared pool, 10-minutes’ drive from Cannes, through the same agent.

Wherever you buy on the coast, it should be easy to reach. There are 12 flights a day from the UK to Nice, and the journey time is about two hours. The warmest part of Portugal in winter is the Algarve, where the mercury can rise to 28C in January. By contrast, the long sandy beaches with ochre cliffs along the Atlantic coast can be cold at this time of year.

Around Faro, in the central Algarve, the most developed part of the coast, Prestige Property Group (01935 817188, www.prestigeproperty.co.uk) has a large four-bedroom villa for £445,000. But prices increase around the nearby upmarket resorts of Quinta do Lago and Vale do Lobo. A three-bedroom townhouse at Lakeside Village, in Quinta do Lago, costs £445,000, and a two-bedroom townhouse in the Quinta do Lago golf resort is on the market for £448,000.

Prices drop the further east from Faro you go. Western Algarve, which includes Portimao, Lagos and Praia da Luz, is greener and less developed. The same agent has a basic one-bed flat near Lagos for just £75,000. There is nothing like the southern hemisphere if you want guaranteed good weather during the European winter. According to Savills, the number of people following the swallows to South Africa, where it is now summer, has doubled in the past couple of years.

Most head for Cape Town, where the temperature in January is usually in the mid-20s, but can pass 30C on hotter days. Getting there is not too painful. Flights to Cape Town take 11 hours, and can cost well in excess of £800, but because you are flying north to south, rather than east to west, there is virtually no jet lag. The favourable exchange rate means that the cost of living is relatively low.

The price of property varies widely. Savills (020 7016 3895, www.savills.co.uk/abroad) is selling a two-bedroom flat at Sea Point for £105,000, while a more upmarket two-bedroom flat with views of Clifton’s Blue Flag beaches costs £355,000. Houses in a leafy Cape Town suburb tend to go for £500,000, but larger, more luxurious houses can cost as much as £4m.

Security can be a worry, and many expats are keen on gated communities with golf courses further inland, where houses cost £300,000-£500,000. The weather across the Far East is in dramatic contrast to the British winter. Thailand, where temperatures at this time of year are firmly in the 30s, is one of the most popular destinations for tourists and property investors alike, even if flights typically take about 11 hours and cost more than £600.

Wealthy expats living and working in the financial centres of Southeast Asia — Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Kuala Lumpur — have traditionally been the main investors in second homes in the area. But Europe-based buyers are piling in to take advantage of the economic boom.

On Ko Samui, £100,000 buys a two-bed villa with a shared pool on the boutique resort of Maenam Hills. For £163,000, you could have a three-bed penthouse at Siranya, a slightly larger resort with a spa (07894 469974, www.clairebrownrealty.com).

Foreigners are banned from owning land in Thailand, which means buying property there can be complicated. Under Thai law, farangs (foreigners) are allowed to buy flats with a lease of up to 30 years, but must set up a Thai-registered company if they want to purchase a villa. For that reason, it is crucial to obtain good legal advice.