



John Batty and his wife Irini:
"A foot in paradise"

Returning home to Crete

After 18 months of negotiations and hard work, John and Irini's house in Crete is finally ready and the couple are looking forward to beginning a new life in Irini's homeland.

John Batty and his wife Irini have had their own house built in Crete and plan to move there in the next couple of years. They live in Wimbledon, south London. Irini works for the London branch of Piraeus Bank and John is concentrating on building up their business, Aegean Blue, which acts as an agent for buying and selling property in Greece to UK purchasers.

"For Irini, who was born in a small village in the Messara area of central Crete, it will be a return home to her family after 25 years living and working in the UK," explains John. "For me, it will be the culmination of a love affair which started in 1977 when I first visited the island and which has intensified in the last 10 years that Irini and I have been together."

Their property is in a tiny mountain village called Karouzano, 25 miles from Heraklion. They discovered the original building back in 2003. "There was an old wreck for sale which was in a prominent position in the village square," says John. "Built around 100 years ago, the property had initially been a single-storey stone dwelling with a primitive



The couple first set sight on their mountain home in 2003



Irini has cleverly decorated the main living area to emphasise space

cellar. But, as is often the case in Greece, following the death of the original owner ownership, it had been divided between his descendants and then again between theirs. Our vision was to restore the house to its original condition, but to do this would involve dealing with seven different co-owners!"

As the property was not on the market through an estate agent, John and Irini had to sort everything out themselves. "Fortunately, the main rooms were owned solely by one lady who was keen to sell for €11,000. She put us in touch with the owners of one more of the rooms and we were able to acquire this for a further €2,000. So we now had the basis for a modest dwelling," explains John.

"The two remaining rooms proved to be problematic. Ownership had passed to four elderly sisters, one of whom was famous locally for being obstructive and we could not convince her to sell. We decided to play a long game and to go ahead with the rooms that we had acquired.

"The project then moved to the next stage – consulting with a master builder, who was part of Irini's extended family, and a mechanical engineer. It was agreed that it would be feasible to add a second storey which would enable us to have a terrace and balcony. The stone arches



John and Irini enjoy fantastic mountain views from their terrace

would become features, there would be two bathrooms and creative space-planning would allow accommodation for up to six people.

"At this point I started to become frustrated by how long the process was taking. Because we were still living in the UK it was inevitable that most of the negotiations and discussions had to take place by phone.

"But, later rather than sooner, our vision began to take tangible shape and the phoenix started to rise from the ashes. Finally it was time to move onto the next level of detail – balcony railings, pergolas and kitchen furniture.

"On ownership of the two remaining rooms, we bought three-quarters of them, on the basis that the worst thing that could happen was the lady who wouldn't sell could either charge us rent or insist on using her quarter of the space for storage.

"The builder then added the courtyard. With a barbecue, pergola, stone-built couches to lounge on and a couple of citrus trees it added the coup de grace to our modest Cretan mountain home."

A second storey was added with the main sleeping area with en suite bathroom, a subsidiary sleeping area doubling as an office and a balcony.

By the time John and Irini had bought all the different rooms they had

spent €21,000 (£15,000). Then, of course, there were the renovation costs on top of this. The couple bought some traditional items of furniture in Crete, but have just shipped a container full of items from the UK, mainly with items that they couldn't get in Greece.

John and Irini will have lots of family and friends living nearby and in their spare time they plan to explore the mountains where the house is located and then go further afield.

The couple plan to keep a home in the UK so they can return to see family and friends, but the rest of the time they will spend enjoying the milder climate and healthier lifestyle Greece has to offer. ■

Johns advice

- Be very careful of letting your heart rule your head. Decide upfront how you will approach the project and don't allow yourself to change your mind.
- Long-distance project management is a recipe for delay and frustration. You need to be there in person, or to have a trusted local foreman, to ensure the work is done when it is supposed to be and as specified.
- Expect the unexpected – there are so many things that can cause delays and distractions. Work on the basis that an agreed deadline is only a general target for Greek workers and that it can be extended when other priorities intervene.
- Don't be deterred. Greece is a wonderful country and owning a property there is akin to having one foot in heaven. When you're finally in your home, sitting out under the stars with a glass of raki, you won't regret a thing.