

# Restoration in Tuscany

**Y**ou have finally committed. The deal has closed ... an absolute bargain considering that pre-crisis prices for such a property may have fetched almost double the price. The sale went relatively smoothly with some small delays but now it's finally in the bag. It's yours!! The estate agent recommended a *geometra* for the restoration with all the right credentials and contacts. You're not comfortable with the idea and you'd like to shop around. Your last experience with builders at home was that horrific renovation that went totally out of control. The architect had many flamboyant ideas that were so convincingly and professionally presented. You just nodded and signed the cheques, promising yourself that you would NEVER make that mistake again; you would instead take control. But this time you need to oversee the project remotely, in a foreign country with foreign mentality, foreign regulations, foreign methods and worst of all, in a foreign language!

Once plans and permits are lined up, some house owners in Tuscany have vague conversations with builders and then ask them to quote for a job. Naturally every builder will have his own approach and pricing. Some will be honest and perhaps have slightly higher pricing because they are genuinely looking after your interests. Others will cunningly cut corners to make their pricing look good. Then there are those who will overprice because they're not interested. It's a little bit like asking for a 48 inch TV and getting 10 conflicting prices. You need to have a precise idea of the brand and model and only then are we comparing apples with apples. In order to get a real comparison for pricing, you need to clearly describe the materials employed or the task at hand. All things considered, you want to get the best job done at a fair price. There's no such thing as a free lunch!

Be it a shoestring budget or a colossal investment, the amount you intend to spend needs to be established from the onset, and then rigorously managed. A detailed bill of quantities will be prepared by your project manager and builders can be invited to quote. There are usually three ways to select a builder. The first is the stick-with-a-winner approach, using someone who has been tried and tested and keeps others happy. The second can be cost-focused, where the lowest bid wins. The third, taking both into consideration, is probably the most popular. Always look at the builder's previous works. He should be experienced in restoration projects and not an expert in building supermarkets! An unsuitable builder can do untold damage and produce a "kitsch" feel to the best projects. Get references and talk with their previous clients. Have a look at the quality of the works and the features employed. Try to find out whether the builder in question loaded on extras during the project and whether the previous clients had problems following handover. Honesty is another important trait, and it takes a lot of skill to assess this when making a decision.

You need to specify when you want the builder to start the job, and more importantly, when you want him to deliver; otherwise things will simply drift. If the restoration job is large, then a series of interim milestones must be set out, such as the completion of roof, facades, floor structures, plastering or laying of tiles. You need to establish expectations on a weekly basis. Every week ask the builder what he is going to deliver for the following 7 days. Keep a good rhythm going. Associating stage payments with each milestone will give the builder a nice incentive to stay focused. Payments should always have a retention of about 5% which gets released at the end of the job once all the snagging has been resolved. Create a sense of urgency with the handover date. Italian builders will respond better to emotional requests rather than a cold schedule ("my entire family arrives on July 28<sup>th</sup> so it must be finished beforehand!!"). When a builder hits the milestone, make the interim payment promptly and thank him for his works and efforts ... you will quickly become a AAA client who will always get priority.



Today, there are no more excuses for ineffective communication. We have an abundance of tools out there: smart phones for calling, taking pictures and videos, or using an app for sharing data or doing video conferences. This means that you can easily get weekly reports, commented videos and pictures to give you a real insight as to the progress of your restoration project. For the day-to-day activity, it is important that your project manager identifies all the decisions that need your input and provides you with alternative options and the costs. Restoration works are always full of surprises and problems. Some will have a heavy impact, forcing you to postpone some other segments of the project to compensate. This is especially true when we stumble across shallow foundations that may require underpinning or a wooden beam ingress that needs replacement. For larger projects, reports should follow a standard template of weekly progress, upcoming works, approaching issues, cost updates, and questions or decisions that need to be made. This will keep you engaged and problems will get addressed while they're fresh.

In a perfect world, contracts would not be necessary. The builder would restore according to the specifications, as per agreed budget, and within the time-frame established. You would pay him on time and everybody would celebrate with a 10-course gala dinner just like they do in the movies. Unfortunately this is not always the case. Having no contract is like driving your car without insurance. A contract is there to safeguard you (and the builder) should something go wrong. The contract needs to establish what the specifications are (drawings, bill of quantities etc.) and give details of the pricing. They need to spell out the milestones and delivery and what happens if the builder is late (perhaps with a penalty clause). The procedure for establishing new prices needs to be agreed upon, as do the stage payments (e.g. milestones, monthly or say every €15,000). Payments normally have 5% retention withheld until 30 to 60 days after all works are complete so that snags can be fixed. The contract will list the respective responsibilities of the builder and client and ensure that the builder is properly registered and is current with his insurance and tax payments. An arbitration process for disputes will be described, as well as the reference jurisdiction should legal proceedings be undertaken. Circumstances that can lead to contract resolution, such as timely delivery or quality issues, need to be clearly identified. A good builder will have no problem signing a contract while less scrupulous builders tend to get uneasy with the idea, panic or even disappear.

Conducting a restoration project in Tuscany from another country can be a daunting task. Success depends heavily on selecting the right team. Be it the builder or the project manager, you need people on your side with the right experience, the right attitude and a good dose of honesty! They will be great communicators, able to convey a message and listen carefully to understand your needs and desires. This will make your project a very pleasurable experience and put you in the right frame of mind for enjoying Tuscany for years to come.

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