

A HOUSE FOR €1: TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?

inside Italy's €1 house scheme

B2
BUSINESS
English
Reading

Can you really buy a house in Italy for less than the price of a coffee? This lesson explores the €1 house scheme — why so many beautiful Italian towns are emptying, what buyers really end up paying, and whether newcomers are saving these towns or changing them forever.



READ

authentic business article



VOCABULARY

12 key B2 business phrases



PRACTISE

comprehension & gap-fill



ROLE-PLAY

decide together as a team



ABOUT THIS LESSON

This lesson looks at Italy's '€1 house' scheme — a plan to bring new life to shrinking rural towns by selling abandoned homes for a token price. You will read an article explaining where the idea came from, the hidden costs behind the headline price, and the benefits and risks for the towns themselves.



BY THE END OF THIS LESSON, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO:

- ✓ Use 12 new business phrases and collocations confidently
- ✓ Discuss the real costs and risks behind an attractive investment
- ✓ Debate a real business decision from different points of view

WARM UP — DISCUSS BEFORE YOU READ

Have property prices in your city risen in recent years? How has this affected people you know?

Why do you think young people often leave small towns for big cities?

Would you ever consider moving to a small village in another country? What would attract you, and what would worry you?

A House for €1: Too Good to Be True?

With property prices **soaring** in many parts of the world, it may be of some comfort to know that somewhere it is possible to buy a house for as little as €1.

You might **assume** that such cheap homes are located in really unattractive areas, but that is far from the truth. In fact, many of them are beautiful villages in rural Italy. Sedini is a picture-perfect hilltop town of white-stone houses with incredible views over a peaceful valley, close to the beach. Montieri is a historic pre-Roman town surrounded by forest, popular with cyclists, hikers and mountain bikers.

SO HOW CAN HOUSES BE SO CHEAP?

The idea is generally credited to an Italian art critic named Vittorio Sgarbi. In 2008 he became mayor of a small town called Salemi, which appeared to be shrinking fast, so he started offering Salemi's empty, **crumbling** buildings to buyers from abroad almost for free. His scheme **drew** new people to the town, boosted local construction work, filled empty houses and brought restaurants, bars and cultural life back to Salemi.

The scheme soon spread to other towns in desperate need of a population boost. Many rural towns in Italy were, and still are, suffering from severe population decline and **crumbling** houses. Italy's population of about 60 million is forecast to fall by 2 million by 2040, which is often **attributed to** an ageing population, record-low birth rates, and young people **seeking** work in bigger cities. Population decline has already left nearly 30% of Italian homes unoccupied with no one to fill them.

CAN IT REALLY BE DONE?

Before you start booking your flights to Italy ready to spend your hard-earned euro, there are many factors to be **wary of**. Houses often go to an auction, where €1 is only the starting price, with many of the more popular homes selling for over €10 000. As the homes are old, rustic (simple, country-style) buildings, buyers are required to renovate a purchased property within three years, a huge task considering many homes have no stable floors, damaged walls, dangerous stairs and damp.

BUSINESS TERMS IN THE ARTICLE

Population decline

A fall in the number of people living in an area, often caused by low birth rates and people moving away for work.

Mayor

The elected head of a town or city, responsible for leading the local government.

Auction

A public sale where an item goes to the person who offers the highest price, starting from a set minimum.

Bureaucracy

Complicated official rules and processes, often seen as slow and involving a lot of paperwork.

KEY PHRASES

to soar

to assume

to draw

crumbling

to be attributed to

to seek

to be wary of

THE €1 HOUSE IN NUMBERS

2008

Salemi launches the first €1 house scheme

2 million

forecast fall in Italy's population by 2040

30%

of Italian homes currently unoccupied

3 years

typical deadline for buyers to renovate

Plus there is endless paperwork, as anyone who has dealt with Italian bureaucracy will know, as well as legal fees **adding up** to €2500, so if you're hoping to pay with a euro you found behind the sofa, it may be advisable to prepare a **contingency** budget.

SO HAS ANYONE REALLY BOUGHT A HOUSE FOR €1 AND LIVED THE ITALIAN DREAM?

In a recent YouTube documentary, an Australian man named Samir found himself in Mussomeli completely by accident during a train strike. He **came across** a local painter who showed him a house which had been empty for 57 years. **At first glance**, the house looked beyond repair, with **crumbling** walls, floors and a few dead pigeons inside, but Samir wasn't **put off** and spotted an opportunity. He decided to purchase four houses, two of them for €1, and paid around €8000 in total before renovating them himself.

Not all stories are as successful as Samir's. Some projects have houses in such a poor state that they are failing **to draw** any interest, and as Europe's climate is heating up faster than other parts of the world, some potential buyers have been **put off** by Italy's recent summer temperatures.

For the towns themselves, the benefits can be significant. Montieri has sold about 70 houses and gained roughly 30 new businesses, and tourism is increasing. There is, however, the danger that the arrival of too many foreigners may cause such towns to lose their character and heritage. Sambuca has been nicknamed Sicily's "Little America", but elderly men in the town say the newcomers respect its heritage and have brought it back to life. In Sedini, some long-term residents remain **wary of** outsiders, but the alternative is potentially worse. As one writer put it, the real choice facing these towns is whether to open their doors and risk changing, or keep them shut and slowly disappear.



"The real choice facing these towns is whether to open their doors and risk changing, or keep them shut and slowly disappear."

— from the article



MORE KEY PHRASES

to add up to

contingency (budget)

to come across

at first glance

to put off

KEY WORDS & PHRASES

to soar

to assume

to draw

crumbling

to be attributed to

to seek

to be wary of

to add up to

contingency

to come across

at first glance

to put off

1 BASED ON THE CONTEXT OF THE ARTICLE

Can you match the words in the box to the definitions listed below? Then add the word into the example sentence. You may need to change the form of the word to fit the meaning of the sentence.

Note: all verbs in the box are given in the infinitive.

1. To make someone lose interest in or enthusiasm for something: _____
 | "I suspect it's the high set-up fee that's _____ new clients."

2. To be regarded as caused by or resulting from something: _____
 | "The drop in Q3 revenue can largely _____ delays in our supply chain."

3. An amount of money or a plan kept ready in case something goes wrong: _____
 | "Let's set aside 10% of the budget as a _____ fund in case costs overrun."

4. To rise very quickly to a high level: _____
 | "Energy costs have _____ this year, so we need to review our pricing."

5. To find or meet something or someone without planning to: _____
 | "I _____ an interesting market report last week that I'd like to share with the team."

6. To be careful about something because it may cause problems: _____
 | "We should _____ signing a long-term contract before we've tested the supplier."

7. To think or accept that something is true, without having proof: _____
 | "I _____ that everyone has had a chance to look at the figures before today."
 | "We shouldn't just _____ the client will renew — let's call them this week."

8. To reach a particular total when everything is combined: _____
 | "With shipping and insurance, the extra costs could _____ €50,000 a year."

9. To attract people, attention or interest: _____
 | "The new campaign has already _____ a lot of interest from potential investors."

10. When you first look at something, before examining it more closely: _____
 | "_____, the figures look positive, but our margins are actually shrinking."

11. Gradually breaking apart, or becoming weaker and failing: _____
 | "Our IT infrastructure is _____, and it's starting to slow the whole team down."

12. To try to find or obtain something: _____
 | "We're currently _____ a partner to help us expand into the Polish market."

2 CAN YOU ANSWER THE QUESTIONS BELOW ABOUT THE TEXT?

1. According to the text, who is credited with starting the €1 house scheme, and what effect did it have on Salemi?

2. What reasons does the article give for Italy's falling population?

3. According to the article, why might a €1 house end up costing much more than €1?

4. What danger do newcomers pose to these towns, and how do elderly residents of Sambuca feel about them?

3 FILL IN THE GAPS

Below you can find a dialogue between two colleagues. Can you fill in the gaps with the words and phrases from the box below? You may need to change the form of some of the verbs in order for them to fit into the sentence.

to be wary of

to soar

contingency

to seek

to assume

to draw

to add up to

to come across

A Retreat in Sicily?

ELENA (MANAGING DIRECTOR):

Mark, I think it's time we looked seriously at the property in Sicily. Office rents in Milan have _____ over the last two years, and a converted building in a quieter town could _____ clients who want a change of scene. While I was researching, I _____ several towns that offer tax incentives to businesses that are _____ to relocate.

MARK (FINANCE DIRECTOR):

I like the idea, but we should _____ moving too fast. I'd _____ that a building that old hides serious structural problems, and renovation work, legal fees and paperwork could easily _____ far more than the purchase price. If we go ahead, I'd want a _____ budget of at least 20% before we sign anything.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Would you consider buying a €1 house in Italy, either as a home or as a business investment? What would attract you to the idea, and what might put you off?

Is it better for a declining town to welcome newcomers and risk losing its character, or to protect its traditions and risk slowly disappearing? Can you think of a similar situation in your own country?

THE SCENARIO

A hospitality company that runs corporate retreats has been offered five abandoned buildings in a small Sicilian town through its €1 house scheme, provided all five are renovated within three years. The leadership team must now decide whether to accept the offer or walk away.

€5

total purchase price for all five buildings

€1.2M

estimated cost of renovating all five buildings

3 yrs

deadline set by the town to complete all renovations

35%

rise in demand for rural retreats among corporate clients

In groups of three or four, take on one of the roles below. Using these figures — and today's key phrases — discuss the benefits and risks of accepting the offer from your character's point of view, then work together to reach a group decision.

THE HEAD OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

- Believes a unique location like this would draw high-paying clients that rivals can't reach.
- Argues that demand for rural retreats is soaring, so the company must move first.
- Points out that the town is seeking investors and may offer tax incentives.

THE CFO

- Is wary of renovation costs, which could add up to far more than €1.2 million.
- Insists on a contingency budget of at least 25% before any commitment is made.
- Suggests renovating one building first as a pilot, rather than taking on all five at once.

THE HEAD OF CLIENT EXPERIENCE

- Worries that the remote location and poor transport links could put off clients.
- Has come across reviews of rural retreats complaining about summer heat and slow internet.
- Sees the town's charm as a selling point, but only with an excellent guest experience.

THE LOCAL PROPERTY CONSULTANT (EXTERNAL)

- Knows the town well and can assess the buildings and local bureaucracy.
- Warns the team not to assume the buildings are solid: some have crumbling walls.
- Reminds the team that some residents may be wary of outsiders, so good relations matter.

Group task: Once everyone has made their case, decide together — accept the offer, start with a pilot, or walk away? Be ready to present your decision to the class.

USEFUL PHRASES

GIVING YOUR OPINION

"From my perspective, this could draw a whole new type of client."

"As far as I'm concerned, the risks are too high."

AGREEING

"I agree — we need a contingency budget in place first."

"Yes, I think a pilot would help us avoid unnecessary risk."

DISAGREEING

"I'm afraid I can't go along with you there."

"At first glance it looks cheap, but the costs could soon add up."

PERSUADING

"We shouldn't let a few risks put us off an opportunity like this."

"If we don't act now, a competitor will."

REACHING A DECISION

"On the other hand, starting with one building might be the safer move."

"On balance, I'd say it's time to..."