



Inspired by the wine

FROM RENOVATING A DERELICT VENETIAN VILLA AND BEING RAIDED BY SHORE PARTIES OF ALBANIAN PIRATES TO HELPING TO FOUND THE DURRELL SCHOOL, THE ASHCROFTS HAVE PACKED A LOT INTO THEIR TIME ON CORFU

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OUR PLACE THE ASHCROFTS

Who David and Alexina Ashcroft.

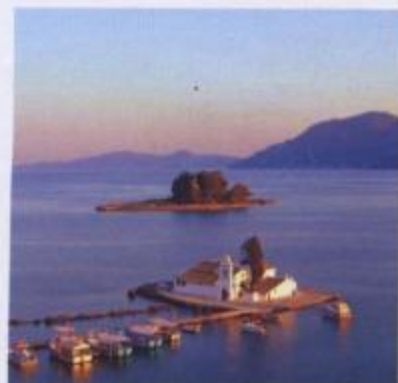
What Three-storey villa in terraced grounds with pool, comprising a three-bedroom (one en-suite) self-catering apartment and a second two-bedroom private apartment.

Where Peruthia in the north-east of Corfu, Greece.

How much £56,000.

Favourite room "Our amazing Venetian marble patio shaded by a 200-year-old vine."

Current value A house of this size and historical value would currently fetch well in excess of €500,000 (£347,825)



Summer 1997: David and Alexina Ashcroft had planned a round of aperitifs on the terrace of their villa in northern Corfu, against the background of another gorgeous sunset. Instead, they found themselves huddled behind their garden wall, peeping over the top to watch the flash from automatic weapons fire, silhouetting the olive trees down in the valley below. Most of the gunfire was coming from a detachment of soldiers from the Greek army – who David and Alex had spent the day providing refreshment for, mainly in the form of their own locally-made wine.

Lying two miles away from north-eastern Corfu, Albania's Adriatic coastline was providing the perfect base for a criminal practice well-known to these waters for 3,000 years. Piracy.

With the bloodshed in the former Yugoslavia at its height and neighbouring Albania in turmoil, there had been a resurgence in this form of marine terrorism. These 20th-century buccaneers had recently

begun to take ashore raiding parties to pillage the small coastal villages along the north of the island.

"It was the classic pirate plan – they'd just upgraded the cutlasses and eye-patches to powerboats and AK-47s," says David, sitting on the same terrace a decade later. "When they started coming ashore, a task force from the Greek army was sent up here to stamp it out. That night they caught three of them in the olive grove below our garden."

"At the time we were up to our necks in renovation work," continues Alex, "and we did wonder if we might have made a monumental mistake. Now we just look back on it as another interesting chapter in our 14 years here."

If your idea of making an effort in your new life abroad involves rolling over occasionally on the pool-lounger, and your version of contributing to your new community equates to patronage of the local sports bar, then David and Alex's life in the sun is not for you. But for more adventurous souls, their story is an inspiration.

"Back in the UK we'd had a farm in

Facing page: the Ashcrofts' enchanting Venetian manor dates back to the 16th century

Above: David and Alexina couldn't be happier in their Greek island home

Corfu

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in south-west Cornwall. David kept a dairy herd," explains Alex "but farming in the UK was getting increasingly hard – and we weren't getting any younger. Eventually, we decided that if we were going to work hard then we wanted the reward of a better lifestyle and surroundings to do it in, and a big part of that was more daylight and sunshine."

"We didn't want to sacrifice being part of a community just to go somewhere hot," David continues "To start a new life we knew we had to find somewhere with people who were friendly and welcoming and who we felt we could fit in with. We chose the Greek islands for exactly that reason. We spent three months looking around before we settled on Corfu. It's an island with a fascinating history, it

has superb architecture and strong links to Britain. It's a good size, too – you don't feel cut off from civilisation or totally overrun by tourists."

Shortly after reaching this decision, providence played its hand as the couple explored the mountainous north-eastern corner of the island and stumbled upon the quiet and quintessentially Greek village of Peruthia, tucked away between the steep hills and the sea.

"It was the just sort of spot we wanted," recalls David, "and right at the top of the village was an amazing place for sale – a historic Venetian manor house built for one of the aristocrats who ruled Corfu in the 16th century. The garden was so overgrown that you could barely force your way to the front door –

“ We decided that if we were going to work hard then we wanted the reward of a better lifestyle and surroundings to go with it ”





and when we did, the property itself was in no better condition. It was uninhabited, with rooms full of rubbish and even rubble. But we'd been looking for a challenge, and when we found out that this historic property was one of only six left on the island, it was a done deal."

The couple made their offer in the autumn of 1993, paying £56,000 plus taxes and legal fees, and embarked upon the huge task of renovating the house and grounds the next spring.

"I don't think I'd dare calculate what it's cost us since," says Alex with a smile, "but it's been every spare penny we've earned, inherited or made from booking out the main part of the house. We restored that first and rent it out as a three-bedroom self-catering apartment. We live in the converted stable block below."

It's taken 13 years of hard work,

and the help of friends and family, but 'Villa Alexina' is now a beautiful property, restored to its 500-year-old Venetian glory, with thick stone walls, stepped terraces, stone archways and cobble paths all lovingly repaired, as well as a new swimming pool and various mod cons.

The couple's favourite part of the house is an area that has remained virtually unchanged since they first arrived here – a beautiful, marble-paved patio, 50 square metres and covered by a magnificent 200-year-old grapevine that drips with fruit and provides shade from the scorching midday sun. The vine yields 300 kilos of grapes on a good year, from which David makes a potent local wine.

"We and our many visitors have enjoyed the odd litre here while looking out across the olive groves to the Albanian coast. When it looks like

Facing page, clockwise from top: the decor is a blend of Greek and classic English styles; the harbour, currently pirate-free; a lot of money went into doing up the house

Clockwise from above: the new pool; the age-old grapevine; the main part of the house is available as a holiday let

it's within walking distance, you know you've had enough!"

"Another wonderful thing about this part of Corfu," explains Alex, "is that we're right in the heart of the area where the Durrell family lived. In fact, Gerald Durrell's favourite beach at Agios Spyridon – which he describes vividly in *My Family and Other Animals* – is just a couple of kilometres from here, and it's just as beautiful today as it was during his childhood here in the 1930s. He and David Bellamy, the botanist and ecologist, were tremendous friends, and I'm delighted that we've also become friends with David over the years, as well as with Gerald Durrell's widow, Lee."

These acquaintances have not been casually made. In 2002, David and Alex became involved in founding The Durrell School, established in premises in the heart of Corfu Town's medieval quarter. The school offers a research library with 3,000 books on subjects related to the lives and



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interests of Gerald Durrell and his elder brother, the acclaimed writer Lawrence, as well as hosting lectures and seminars with guest speakers from all around the world.

"It has been amazing to be involved with," enthuses David. "Recently we've had seminars on everything from 'The emergence of modern Greece' to 'Madness and creativity', with speakers ranging from Oxford professors and some of Greece's best known writers and critics to Indian philosophers and Buddhists from China, all debating together."

What the Ashcrofts have achieved in the last 14 years has been remarkable. They have become much-loved members of their local community, and created a new life for themselves that's as unique and as beautiful as their renovated Venetian home.

For more details

Visit www.villa-alexina.co.uk or call 0030 26630 98147 for information on David and Alexina's house.



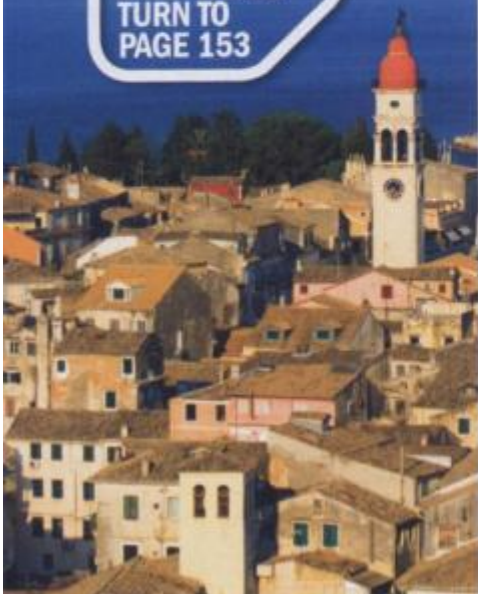
Above: Gerald Durrell's most famous book; the school has a huge research library

Right: thick walls make the interiors nice and cool

Below left: the island's capital, Corfu Town



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ESSENTIALS

Corfu, Greece's 'Emerald Isle'

Corfu, synonymous with the earliest package deals of the late 1960s, is still the most popular of the Greek islands with British holiday-makers. However, thanks to its size and geography, it's easy to escape from the tourist throng. Resorts tend to be located in the far north and south.

The property market in Corfu is buoyant and prices are reasonable (even by Greek standards) rising at an annual rate of around five per cent.

Historically, Corfu has always been the staging post between Greece and the rest of Mediterranean Europe and it's served by frequent domestic and

international flights, as well as ferry connections between the Greek mainland and the eastern Italian coast.

It's also the greenest of the Greek islands with a spectacular mountainous interior across the north and a plethora of unspoilt fishing villages inlets and bays. To the east, above the stylish capital of Corfu Town, along the coast to Kassiopi and up in the mountains behind, is an area studded with high-end luxury villas so popular with well-heeled cosmopolitan English investors that it has been



dubbed Kensington-on-Sea.

Corfu offers plenty of other secluded options, such as Paleokastritsa in the west, set around a beautiful double bay. Property prices on the island vary from around €30,000 (£20,845) for a farmhouse in need of total renovation, into the millions for top-of-the-range private villa properties.

“Resorts tend to be located in the far north and south”

