



## REYKJAVIK, ICELAND

**What's the pull?** For hipster types who want something a bit different, and don't want a perma-tan to go with their beard, the capital of Iceland is not only a magical little city (with a population of about 118,000, it is a similar size to Chester), but a fantastic base for exploring the country – and for seeing the northern lights.

**Where to live** Avoid the postwar concrete horrors that pockmark the city and opt for a metal-clad *barujarn* ("iron wave") house, clad in corrugated iron and brightly painted. A three- or four-bedroom example would cost about £330,000. If you'd prefer more mod cons and a view, there are blocks of flats sprouting around Reykjavik's harbour. The



most high-profile is 101 Skuggi, which is being sold off plan in advance of a 2017 completion; prices range from £120,000 to £1.7m for a penthouse.

**What to do** Be seen at Dill, which leads the new wave of restaurants, and make sure you're never without a copy of the programme for the Harpa concert hall.

**The local view** Iceland was all but bankrupt in 2008, but has made a strong fightback. As of May, house prices had risen by 11.8% since hitting the bottom in 2010, according to the nation's central bank. Yet history shows that the country's property market is as unstable as its geology.

**Who to contact** Stakfell (stakfell.is), Híbyli Fasteignisala (hibyli.is), Re/Max (remax.is).

Ruth Bloomfield



Villa Tucci has an idyllic setting in the Apennine foothills. The interiors are an eclectic mix – with Lefroy Brooks taps as standard

His designs grace the world's most stylish bathrooms, and they are tested out in this Tuscan villa. Now Christo Lefroy Brooks is selling up for £5.4m.

By Hugh Graham

# Luxury on tap



Nicole Maruti



tapestries from China and a Moroccan Berber rug. The art is also a patchwork: biblical scenes, British hunting prints, classical marble busts and Buddha statues. Yet Christo is not precious: there are eccentric touches such as shop mannequins and a 1930s Monte Carlo travel poster. He also has a few pieces of Ikea furniture, including a steel kitchen cabinet customised with a Cardosa stone top.

This multicultural melange sums up Christo himself. Born in Ireland, but descended from French Huguenots, he was one of the few Protestants in Connemara, and never felt Irish. Yet he also felt like a foreigner when he was sent to boarding school in England at the age of seven. "I always felt stateless, so when I first came to Italy, I suddenly felt at home," he says.

Dressed in a floaty linen shirt, and with a relaxed and chatty demeanour, he seems more of a free spirit than a number-crunching suit or uptight designer.

"I hitchhiked around Europe when I was 18 and worked in Rome for a while doing odd jobs. I fell in love with the freedom of the place. I loved the sound of the language, the food. And it reflected my creative character. If the English are the grown-ups of Europe, Italians are the children."

Christo first moved to Italy in the late 1970s, with his first wife, and settled by Lake Garda for 10 years. He had bought a factory that manufactured soles – his first business, Brooks Boots, made cowboy boots and designer trainers. That morphed into a business selling brassware (door and desk handles) to British DIY stores.

In the late 1980s, when his first child was ready to start school, he sold his company and moved back to London, where he started buying vintage bath/shower mixers from Camden Market and restoring them. Lefroy Brooks, the company, was born, and he established a foundry in Wolverhampton. "It was

**T**uscany has long been associated with the rich and famous, from the gilded palazzos of the Medicis to the late-1990s era of "focaccia socialism", when Tony Blair wangled free holidays in luxury villas, and Sting and Trudie bought a £3m estate. Countless books and films have fuelled the lifestyle fantasies of Britain's middle classes and made the region even more fashionable. But one of the most stylish celebrity villas is owned not by a pop singer or politician, but by a new kind of rock star for our interiors – mad age: Christo Lefroy Brooks, the king of bathroom taps.

The British company Lefroy Brooks is the Farrow & Ball of bathrooms – before Farrow & Ball became a design cliché. Fetishised by architects, designers and decor-mag addicts, it offers reproduction antique taps, baths and sanitaryware, from late Victorian and Edwardian to art deco and midcentury modern – imagine what Hercule Poirot's bathroom would have looked like.

The Queen has Lefroy Brooks at Windsor Castle, but hipsters like the brand, too: you'll find it in boutique hotels such as Soho House, in New York. No wonder the company sold £40m worth of kit last year alone.

Christo, 63, has spent almost £2m of his profits – and 10 years – restoring Villa Tucci, in a hilltop village outside Lucca, in a style that's as tasteful, understated and romantic as his famous taps. Set in 30 bucolic acres of olive groves, vineyards and lemon trees, the pink 17th-century villa – now on the market for €6.8m (£5.4m) – is a mix of Italian rusticity, Irish antiques and bohemian global chic.

The main floor has the battered terracotta floors, beamed ceilings and faded walls that are synonymous with provincial Tuscany, as well as pastoral trompe l'oeil frescoes as quintessentially



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→ all about kitchens then, not bathrooms," he says. "A tap was a tap. But I just fell in love with these traditional taps. And in about 1990, Philippe Starck started doing things with bathrooms, which helped. People started to spend money on them."

By 2000, with his business firmly established in England, Christo felt the pull of his adopted country again, and chose the Lucca area as his new home base; he's there for about half the year. The medieval walled city is postcard-pretty, but not as touristy as Florence or Siena, and is 40 minutes from Pisa airport — much closer than the Little England enclave of Chiantishire.

The scenery is more dramatic, too: it's in the foothills of the Apennines and only 40 minutes from the coast. Villa Tucci appealed partly because it had a convenient village setting, in Aquileia, yet offered the kind of rural Tuscan vistas that make you hear opera in your head.

It took him two years of protracted negotiations to buy the villa, for an undisclosed sum — innumerable relatives were squabbling over the property. "It was a nightmare — complicated wasn't the word for it. The cousins were fighting and there were about 20 lawyers involved. We finally just said, 'Forget it.' And as

soon as we walked away, they came running after us."

Next came the task of renovating the property: rewiring, replumbing, reroofing, replacing bowed floors, installing gas heating and restoring the frescoes. Painting the walls was an epic undertaking. The colours had to be rich and Tuscan, yet look worn and mottled. So Christo hired Abraham, an Eritrean handyman, to help him perfect the hues.

They bought whitewash and mixed it with natural dyes and pigments. "We would get the right blue and sort of sponge it over with yellow. Or we'd do the ceilings white and wash it over with nicotine, grey and brown, sponging and wiping at the same time. It's difficult. You don't want it to look new, but you don't want those horrible paint effects that bored housewives do. It just looks natural."

And, of course, the bathrooms were all done up in Lefroy Brooks. Indeed, Villa Tucci has become a testing ground for the firm's new lines: Dupont, a late deco range, will be launched next year, as will a range of Carrara marble tiles, tubs and chinaware. "I etched the tiles with acid to take the sheen off and make them look beaten-up."

The company may also soon branch out into kitchens: at Villa Tucci, Christo created a

"streamlined Etruscan sink". It's a long, grey shallow trough made from Cardoso stone, with a Lefroy Brooks bath/shower mixer tap.

"What I like about Italian sinks is that they're not too deep, unlike Belfast sinks."

Yet the creative heart of Lefroy Brooks is the study: it resembles an old curiosity shop, with a display case stuffed with antiques and salvaged plumbing. There are French bronze taps from 1910 in the shape of swan heads, 1950s Bakelite ones from a hairdressing salon, 1920s examples from Turkey. "I collect taps, it's a disease."

Christo thinks his tastes were formed in childhood. "I was a bloody difficult child,



Christo Lefroy Brooks, left, completely restored the property, blending classic Tuscan decor with objects from around the world

that's an important part of his success."

The couple want to make a fresh start, so are selling up. For one thing, the villa is too big for two. It has 32,000 sq ft of living space over three storeys, with two flats, several outbuildings and a consecrated chapel with ancient pews, fonts and altarpiece. Christo's own children rarely visit these days: as well as Slane, he has a daughter, Italy, 27, and a son, Isaac, 4, from two previous marriages. What's more, Skobline is an urban creature, so they are looking for a smaller place in a city, possibly Rome.

Rustic Italian fantasies can be hard work. At Villa Tucci, the outbuildings still need restoring and the maintenance never stops. The estate manager, Gianpiero, who is there all year round, has created an Enchanted April-style Eden in the grounds, full of gaudy blooms and edible temptations: persimmons, figs, lemons and 1,000 olive trees, not to mention uncultivated vineyards.

"It would be good for someone who wants to play the farmer," Christo says. But not all the time: you can pop to the village shop for bread, ham and mozzarella, sip an espresso in the cafe and practise your Italian with a peasant. In short, you can live out the British middle-class fantasy — Lefroy Brooks taps included.

020 7993 2967, casaandcountry.com; villatucci.com; lefroybrooks.com

so I spent a lot of time at my grandmother's house. She was very English, and had this large house in the New Forest. It was a happy time. I would wander around the house, which had these amazing bathrooms. I think a lot of my taps are straight out of that house — they are childhood memories." He says his next line might have a 1960s feel, and reckons the Rolling Stones lips icon would make a good bath filler.

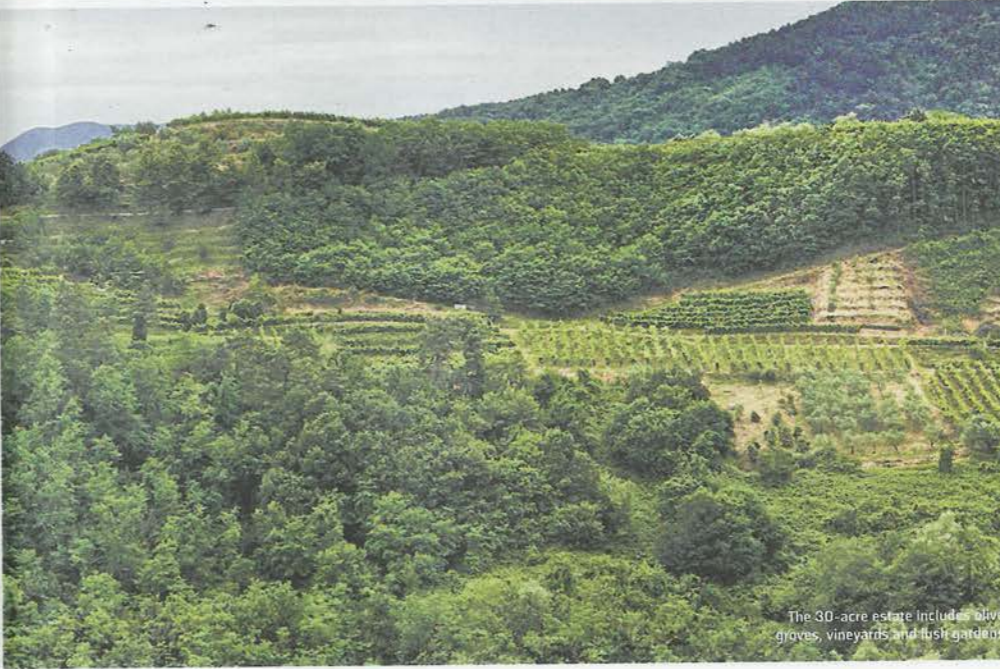
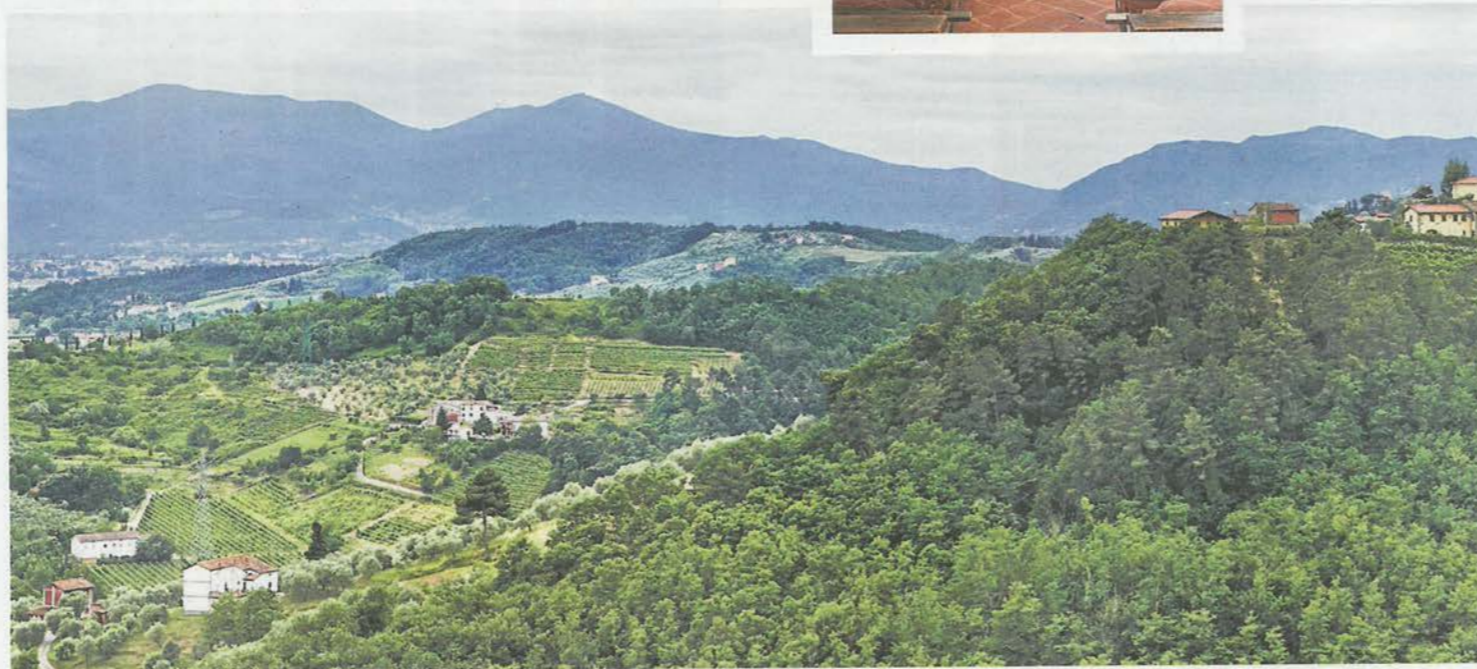
Speaking of rock stars, the study also contains a microphone and recording equipment. Christo is gradually handing over the running of Lefroy Brooks to his son, Slane, 29, so he can write songs and start a record company. He has recorded an album with his friend

Julian Hinton, a keyboard player for Trevor Horn; Christo, a poet, wrote the lyrics. "It's another disease," he says. "It's not something you choose to do. It's something you have to do."

Christo studied philosophy and psychology at Trinity College Dublin, and wanted to be a journalist. Instead, he became a designer; aesthetes might argue that there's poetry in his taps. "He wasn't taught this in school, he learnt through life," says his fiancée, Irene Skobline. A former actress from France who has appeared in films by Eric Rohmer, the gentle, softly spoken Skobline met Christo three years ago in Thailand, where she was studying Healing Tao. "He's creative and artistic, and



Painting the walls was an epic undertaking by an Eritrean handyman — the colours had to be rich and Tuscan, yet look worn and mottled



The 30-acre estate includes olive groves, vineyards and lush gardens



€9.5m

CITY BOLT HOLE OF THE WEEK

Home to the ill-fated French aristos before the revolution, the 7th arrondissement, in Paris, has a high concentration of tourist attractions, including the Eiffel Tower. Behind a period facade at 140 Rue de Grenelle — an estate once owned by a Bourbon princess, and later the home of Marshal Foch — five buildings have been converted into flats, townhouses, duplexes and one mansion, with sumptuous interiors and use of the huge, manicured formal gardens. Two-bedders start at €9.5m (£7.6m). 020 7861 5034, knightfrank.com; 140grenelle.com



\$2.95m

CARIBBEAN HIDEAWAY OF THE WEEK

Lower Bay House, on the small, relatively undeveloped Grenadine island of Bequia, has had its price cut from \$3.45m. Set between two sandy white beaches on a dramatic peninsula, and designed by a Mustique architect, the three-bedroom waterfront home has a pool, a waterfall, a cave and an outside gazebo with a bar. By day, you can enjoy views of the sailing regattas; when night falls, relax on the curved stone seating surrounding the fire pit, or head out to a local music festival. 020 7349 9772, aylesford.com



€425,000

QUIRKY HOME OF THE WEEK

Anyone for rooms with a view? This holiday home at Sao Bartolomeu de Messines, in the Algarve, offers town, country and water vistas — you can see the coast at Armacao de Pera. It's a conversion of two windmills that date from the 1850s: in the main one, you'll find a bedroom, a fitted kitchen, a living/dining area and a conservatory, while the second has a guest bedroom and a roof terrace. There's an eight-metre pool in the garden, which also has a barbecue area. 00 351 289 842992, meravista.com