



JOIN A RETREATS CLUB AND YOU HAVE A CHOICE OF LUXURY HOLIDAY HOMES WHERE STAFF WILL ATTEND TO YOUR EVERY NEED, WRITES NUALA CALVI

Picture it: sitting on the rooftop terrace of your 14,000 sq ft Moroccan villa, overlooking your five acres of olive groves, watching the sun set over the Atlas Mountains while your personal chef prepares dinner in a traditional local oven.

That was the dream of the late Mirk Birley, founder of Mayfair club Annabel's, who commissioned the €4.5 million North African retreat which he sadly never lived to see completed.

Now his holiday home – and his view – could be yours for €300,000, following its acquisition by private retreats club Botiga.

The newly-launched Mayfair company aims to take the concept of fractional ownership to a new level, by offering its members a share in, and use of, a portfolio of super-luxury, fully-staffed properties in some of the most stunning locations around the globe.

It's one of just a handful of UK-based outfits following the example of American "destination clubs", which are growing in popularity as the gloomy economic forecasts make high-worth investors reluctant to buy second homes outright.

"These aren't just upmarket timeshares," explains Botiga co-founder Kit Harrison, who also established high-end ski chalet operator Descent International. "You're not just buying 'right of use' – you're buying shares in an offshore property fund which buys property around the world, and, as the value of that property goes up, so your shares go up.

"In terms of risk it's good, because your investment is not focused on





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Vacation venture



one location. And for 7-15 per cent of the cost of one house you'll be able to make use of any one of 60 in our portfolio."

Botiga aims to make the properties in its portfolio the most valuable of any comparable clubs in Europe and the US, with houses typically starting at €5 million. Birley's villa, for example, is being completed by designer Nicky Haslam; Miranda Brooks is landscaping the gardens, and the site also boasts a swimming pool, steam room, tennis courts and boules pitch.

In Kenya, the company is buying a camp set in its own private game reserve with a watering hole just 15 yards from the swimming pool, so you can watch elephants bathing while you do.

Other properties include a hill-top Andalucian villa with its own cinema, massage room, spa and tennis courts, and a 17th-century farmhouse in Provence with vineyards and lavender fields.

Uniquely, Botiga properties are fully staffed – chalets and villas come with a full-time manager, chef and maids, who make sure the beds are turned down every night, your favourite foods are cooked to perfection every day, and the icebox is always full.

Mountain properties have an even bigger staff. "When you're coming off the slopes in your ski boots you don't want to drive home, so there's a chauffeur," says Harrison. "And you need an assistant to arrange the après ski, the massage and the kids' activities – so we provide a team of four plus maids.

"In our city retreats – small town houses and apartments in top

locations like New York, Paris, Rome and Barcelona – the level of service is softer. You don't necessarily want a chef, because you want to go out and experience the best restaurants in town, but you might still want a butler or a chauffeur to pick you up after a shopping spree."

Over time the company builds up a detailed profile of its members, so staff know in advance about your children's allergies, what newspapers you read, what DVDs you might want to watch, and whether you take tea or coffee in the morning. A dedicated PA in the UK makes all your travel arrangements for you, while a house manager at each property heads the staff and organises everything from sailing trips to restaurant bookings.

For the privilege, Botiga members pay "dues" of €35,000, on top of membership of between €312,000 and €625,000. Unsurprisingly, they tend to be individuals with a high net worth – typically £5 million to £20 million – and are either directors or senior managers in sectors such as finance, IT and the wine trade. "They're the guys who love the upside of owning property, but who know that after a while having a second home becomes a bit of a burden," says Harrison.

"They don't want to feel bound to go to the same place every year. They know they could stay in the top hotels instead, but even in places like The Four Seasons there's going to be someone in a shell suit two tables down. Being a member of a club makes you feel like you belong, that you're part of something. You know that, wherever you go, you're going to be looked after and treated as special."

