



Nick Cornish

Murals of the Italian countryside were painted by an LA artist

# Beautifully remodelled

Britain's first Cosmo cover girl left the catwalk behind for the canals of Venice, where she restored Titian's old house — now on sale for £1.53m. Zoe Zare Hall pays a visit

When a statuesque 21-year-old Gloucestershire girl called Julie Crosthwaite, with her cascade of blonde curls, traffic-stopping red dress and power cleavage, was chosen to grace the first British cover of Cosmopolitan magazine 40 years ago, she launched the bible for a new generation of empowered young women — and her own long, successful career as a model and later as a television producer.

Now 61 and still strikingly willowy, Julia Panama (a revised first name and her third husband's surname) has left behind London, where she was talent-spotted as a teenager on the King's Road, and LA, where she worked in television, and found a fittingly elegant place to call home — Venice. It's just perfect for her: an eye-catching, idiosyncratic city that never goes out of fashion or lacks admirers.

Casa di Tiziano, the 16th-century house that Julia and her partner, Claude Buchert, a French internet entrepreneur, bought in 2001, is also where Venice's most famous artist, Titian, lived for 40 years, until his death in 1576.

"I was living in LA at the time and my original idea was to buy a tiny pied-à-terre in Venice," says



The house was once on the water, but newer buildings now block out the noise



Julia, who splits her time between Venice and Paris, where she sources and designs homes for wealthy clients. "But I'm a history nut, and as soon as I saw the crenellated walls and heard the house belonged to Titian, I was gone."

Located in the Fondamenta Nuove area of Venice's Cannaregio district, a 15-minute walk from the tourist mecca of St Mark's Square, her house sits a minute's walk away from the lagoon and has a rare feature in Venice, a garden. In Titian's time, the house was on the waterfront (buildings sprung up in front on reclaimed land two centuries ago) and he was able to see his village in the Dolomites from the garden, where he would host lavish parties.

"He and his guests would then jump into waiting gondolas, where the party would continue, with musicians on board," says Julia, who has become something of a Titian expert since buying the house, and used pictures from the period to influence its renovation from the pipes and wires up.

"When I bought the house I didn't realise I would be sucked into

the Titian mystique, but we meet people who live in huge palazzi and as soon as they hear where we live, they want to come round for a drink," she says.

The Titian magic extended to the builders who helped her with the renovation project, during which they unearthed a centuries-old curved reed wall. "The contractors were thrilled to be working on Titian's house, as it's a very special place to the Venetians," Julia says. "They thought it was brilliant that we had bought it, were renovating it and were foreign, as they told us even Italians weren't mad enough to do that."

The garden needed as extensive an overhaul as the house, its soil so caked in salt from centuries of the lagoon's high tides that Julia had to remove the top metre of soil throughout and replace it before she could start planting.

The entire transformation project ran smoothly, however, thanks to Julia's newly acquired Italian — the couple also enrolled on a four-year course at UCLA to learn Italian — and her experience as an interior decorator.

"We moved in while they were still working on the house, so they had to get on with it and they had just three months to do everything," she recalls. "Stefano, the main contractor, wanted us to get out of the house every day, so he would send us off to a different friend's restaurant. Every time, when we went to pay the bill, they would tell us Stefano had already done it. That's very Venice."

Set over three floors, the house has three bedrooms, two of which are large suites with a cosy, beamed feel. On the main floor, the piano nobile, with



Titian, left, painted the views from the garden

its four-metre-high ceilings, the light floods in — another rare feature in Venice. "I'm sure that's why Titian was drawn to it. Most houses in Venice are very dark, as they are built so close together," Julia says.

On this floor, Julia wanted to expose the beams that lie two metres above the current ceiling, as they would have been in Titian's day, and turn the two existing rooms into one large one, but the planning authorities wouldn't let her, feeling that the division of the rooms 200-odd years ago was also part of the building's history.

The result is two contrasting rooms: Julia's "summer" room, where you instantly relax among walls covered with a bucolic mural depicting a hazy Italian countryside, painted by the LA-based artist Maria Trimbell, and the "winter room" — "where I have my tea and crumpets when it's cold and damp". It is a snug den, with the couple's beloved backgammon table and a TV set in a confession box. There is also an old marble fireplace, "which we bought when we first moved here and hired a van to drive around the Veneto region, like gypsies, sourcing furniture".

It's a long way from LA and the King's Road, but now Venice provides her with all the glamour she needs. She happily recounts the highs of her modelling days. "There was a point when I was on posters everywhere, advertising everything from swimwear to cigars, and surrounded by Ferraris and helicopters. But that was a lifetime ago," says Julia, who has two grown-up children, Nicholas, 28, and Zoe, 24.

"Venice is terribly social," she says. "It's a small place, so you have the human interaction of a village, but all the advantages of a big city, such as world-class art and wonderful music."

"I don't like flying or hotels any more, so our house here has become our nucleus, and people are happy to come

to us. We take our boat out to little islands such as Murano and Torcello to go swimming and eat in the chic little restaurants that are cropping up. It's a fabulous life here."

There is one thing, though, that Casa di Tiziano lacks: a boat dock. Julia and Claude can't use their boat as often as they would like, as they moor it some distance away. Now Julia is hoping to sell the house for £1.53m (£1.53m) and find a new Venetian renovation project, with space for her boat, which, to a Venetian, is like owning a car.

On my way back to San Marco, a man on a nearby bridge proves her point, deftly hopping over the edge and jumping down into his small boat below, to whizz off to that night's dinner destination. Venice's waterways are in full flow, the singing gondoliers out in force with their snap-happy tourists, and the exorbitant water taxis — "the drivers are the rudest and the richest men in the city," one estate agent tells me — zipping across the lagoon.

There are more properties available now, compared with peak in 2007, and it's easier to negotiate prices, says Ann-Marie Doyle, director of Venice Sotheby's Realty. "But Venice isn't a distressed market, as the properties are historic and listed, so they have an intrinsic value."

That's the thing with Venice — it's too distractingly beautiful to get anything done. That's something Julia knows all about from her modelling days. These days, she's happy to be the one behind the camera in the most photogenic of cities.

# Casa di Tiziano is for sale through Knight Frank; 020 7629 8171, knighthfrank.com

SUNDAY TIMES DIGITAL

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## VENETIAN FINDS

Three tempting waterfront homes for sale in La Serenissima



### San Marco £4m

Just two minutes' walk from Piazza San Marco, Palazzo Melin del Cadoraro, a listed 15th-century palace on the Barcaroli canal, is being converted into 18 flats, with two boat docks. Due for completion early next year, they start at £600,000 and rise to £4m for a first-floor piano nobile apartment. 00 39 041 522 0093, venicesothebysrealty.com



### Castello £1.24m

This waterfront two-bedroom flat has 180-degree views taking in the mega-yachts moored directly in front as well as the islands of Giudecca and Lido beyond. The same agent is also selling a 100 sq metre attic flat in Arsenale, in need of complete renovation, for £562,000. 020 7629 8171, knighthfrank.com



### San Polo £486,600

On the first floor of the 17th-century Palazzo Bernardi, close to the famous Rialto bridge, this recently refurbished 90 sq metre flat looks out onto the Rio de Sant'Antonio canal. Air-conditioned and fully furnished, it has one bedroom and an open-plan kitchen and living room. 020 7016 3754, savills.co.uk/abroad