

After communism, Mafia gangs and problems over title deeds, the good news for British

Will second homes now

By **Richard Webber**

If anywhere in Europe can still be described as a hidden gem, it has to be Albania. For four decades, this backwater in the Balkans was an isolated, secretive basket case ruled by its iron-fisted communist dictator, Enver Hoxha. Albanians could not travel abroad – even to fish off the coast – and anyone who tried, such as swimming to Greek Corfu two miles away, risked being gunned down. Religion, private cars and miniskirts were banned.

Hoxha died in 1985 and the Marxist regime was swept away with the rest in 1990, but then along came the Mafia, with Albanians gaining a dreadful reputation for people-trafficking and drug-running.

For all its natural attractions – the beautiful coastline, the wild mountains – selling Albania as a viable holiday-home destination is an uphill struggle.

Property companies have sprung up but there are major problems concerning clean title and buyers should exercise caution.

Land registration is a particular difficulty, as private property was abolished under communism.

One British buyer who had his fingers burnt is Yorkshireman Eddie Machen, 61, who in 2001 paid £56,000 for a three-bedroom villa in Linza, in the mountains north of the capital, Tirana. His villa was repossessed when the bank noticed one of the title deeds was forged.

'I used £28,000 of my savings and borrowed the rest from the bank, whose solicitors went through all documentation and were happy,' he says. 'A year later, when I applied for

additional money for improvements, a bank clerk found one of the original documents had been falsified.

'The mayor's office that issued the document demanded a further £14,000 to make it legal.' Eddie refused to pay, and the bank claimed the property. Now living in the North East of England with his Albanian wife Gizelle, 54, he still plans to buy a new home in the country.

'It's possible to invest in Albania but you need proper guidance,' says

Eddie, who hopes to use his experience to help other buyers. 'People will guarantee that the house they're selling is theirs but if a dispute occurs, the court system, which has only been going 20 years, is not geared up to deal with such issues.'

'Often more than one family will own land, so it's important to see the original paperwork by tracing it back through the land registry.'

In addition to land title issues,

corruption remains a big problem. 'Politicians can be paid for results that suit their purposes,' says Eddie. 'Land that is designated as parkland can have its origin changed depending upon the amount paid. Sadly, it's the norm.'

Potential hazards are, however, offset by the charm of Albania and its people. Only three hours' flying time from the UK, the country enjoys about 300 sunny days a year.

Tirana is no Paris or Barcelona, as

the potholed roads and power cuts testify, but new shops are springing up, streetside cafes are buzzing and there is an air of optimism, symbolised by the garishly painted apartment blocks, courtesy of the city's mayor who had the bright idea of transforming dour communist-built blocks with a splash of colour.

It's a city loved by Eddie. 'It's so alive,' he says. 'I could visit a village and guarantee someone, noticing I'm a stranger, would invite me in for a



BRIGHT FUTURE: Communist-era flats in the capital, Tirana, have been spruced up. Above: Eddie Machen, with wife Gizelle, plans to buy again

