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A shore sale: Italy saves lighthouses on the rocks

FROM RICHARD OWEN IN ROME

FOR SALE: early 18th-century property, built 1709 by Cosimo III de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, inactive since mid- 19th century, in need of renovation. Property consists of square cylindrical white stone tower 20 metres (66ft) high on arched base. Great views.

Peace and quiet guaranteed: the property is a lighthouse on a shoal four miles (6km) northwest of Livorno and accessible only by boat.



Italy is offering 88 of its lighthouses, which have been famed since Roman times, on long-term leases, in an attempt to stop them becoming ruined or even collapsing.

The Italian Navy, which has been responsible for the upkeep of the *fari* (lighthouses) since 1910, operates 200 functioning lighthouses along Italy's 5,000 miles of coastline. But others have fallen into disuse and the state can no longer afford to maintain them.

The solution, which was devised by the Agenzia del Demanio, the body that administers state properties, will offer them for conversion into hotels, health and fitness centres, restaurants or museums. Officials said that the length of the leases was negotiable.

One celebrated 1850 white stone lighthouse, at Capo d'Otranto in southern Italy, has already been restructured with financial help from the local council and turned into a "virtual museum" of the sea and navigation, due to open later this year.

Tommaso Farenga, the engineer who designed the museum, said the venture was "a wager which I believe will pay off".

Offers have also been made on another 20 lighthouses, from Livorno and Elba on the Tuscan coast to Ischia near Naples, Trapani in Sicily and the Tremiti Islands on the Adriatic. Ten will be converted into hotels and ten into restaurants. Enrica Simonetti, the author of a guide to Italian lighthouses, said that many people seeking a refuge from modern life applied to the naval authorities to become lighthouse keepers and were disappointed to find that most operational lighthouses were automated.

"I have seen many, many of our lighthouses in a state of near



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collapse, and change of use is one way to save them,” Signora Simonetti said.

Italian officials said that restructuring projects would be monitored to ensure that they were “in keeping with the historic and environmental traditions of the property and its landscape”.

One famous lighthouse not available for change of use is the 16th-century Lanterna at Genoa. Its predecessor, which was built in the 12th century, is said to have had the uncle of Christopher Columbus, Antonio Colombo, as its keeper. The 120m (390ft) tower is the symbol of Genoa and has the city’s coat of arms painted on its side.

The lighthouse leasing plan forms part of a wider project to sell off unwanted state-owned properties to help to plug Italy’s huge budget deficit. The scheme was contested by conservationists, who said that the country’s cultural heritage should remain in public hands.

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