And the Newest Country to Court Rich Chinese Immigrants Is…

Countries in southern Europe are tripping over themselves in the competition to woo wealthy Chinese investors looking to buy property in exchange for a resident visa.

The latest entrant into the international house-for-visa market: Greece, which is currently rolling out a new program that will offer renewable five-year resident visas to foreigners who spend at least €250,000 ($328,000) on residential real estate. The Greek investment requirement is now the lowest among neighboring Southern European countries who offer similar immigration programs involving real estate.

Announced in May, the Greek scheme follows Portugal, which last year began to offer a five-year "golden visa" that set the bar at a real estate purchase worth €500,000. Cyprus also has put a similar program in place last year that requires investors to spend €300,000 on a property.

Spanish government officials said earlier this year they planned to enact a similar scheme, though they have yet to announce details about the minimum investment requirement.

Immigration experts say these programs are after one specific demographic: wealthy Chinese.

"Everybody in Europe is coming to us to sell their houses to the Chinese," said Hong Kong-based immigration lawyer Wendy Wong at S. W. Wong & Associates, whose majority of clients are from mainland China.

To be sure, European countries already have investor-immigration schemes, but most don't allow for real estate investments to be part of the equation. The U.K., for example, offers 5-year permanent resident visa to those who invest at least £1.5 million in government bonds. Hungary offers similar status to those who invest €250,000 in bonds. Germany also has a business-immigration program where the country will grant a visa to those who start and operate a business worth at least €250,000.

Those programs aren't nearly as popular among wealthy Chinese as the southern European programs that have a real estate focus, according to Hong Kong-based immigration lawyer Denny Ko at Henley & Partners. Property is what really entices China's rich, who use their secondary European homes as rental properties, vacation homes or simply leave them empty in hopes of a rise in housing prices for the duration of their residency visa.

"The mentality among most Chinese is they look at the real estate first, and the visa second," said Mr. Ko. "Some just view the visa as a bonus."

The proposition among the rival countries is all the same: Invest lots of money and in exchange governments will hand over a five-year residency visa that allows for easy entry. Currently, Chinese travelers must apply for a visa for every visit to countries covered under the Shengen Area, a zone that comprises most of continental Europe. A Chinese investor who buys a house in Portugal and obtains a permanent resident visa, for example, would be able to travel freely within the Schengen Area for 90 days every six months.

Ms. Wong says she generally cautions her Chinese clients away from Europe, reminding them that taxes can be onerous in certain situations and residency requirements can be cumbersome. The Portuguese program, for example, requires investor-immigrants to stay in the country a minimum of seven days during the first year and 14 days every two years during the rest of the five-year term.

“People look at the big house and the nice pictures,” she said. “But I always tell them that there are disadvantages. How are you going to maintain that house when you’re in China? And are you really going to fly all the way there every year to keep your visa?”

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