

Poles cross border to buy cheap homes

WARSAW

Wealthy Poles are invading the border regions of Germany and snapping up properties at rock bottom prices in what estate agents call a dramatic reversal of historical roles.

The widespread expectation that after Poland joined the European Union its cheap homes would be bought up by Germans has been turned on its head as the Poles search for "lebensraum" in the west.

For centuries Germans have headed east, as knights, traders or, most notoriously, builders of a Third Reich. Now the Poles are going in the other direction, not just as migrant labourers but as house buyers.

They are attracted by average prices of about \$30,000 for a family home in good repair. A rundown cottage can be bought for as little as \$500 and a chic manor house with indoor pool can be picked up for \$550,000.

The trend says as much about the desperate economic state of east Germany and the exodus of locals as it does about the Poles' entrepreneurial zeal and desire to catch up with their richer neighbours after decades of communism.

Michal Wojtysiak, 42, recently became the owner of a quaint, century-old building in Penkun. The Polish catering manager bought the village

butcher's shop, family house and florist's, all for \$9250.

A few streets away, a retired doctor, Andrzej-Jerzy Wroblewski, 62, proudly strolled the grounds of the derelict Apostolic church, now his for \$2425, as is the old bakery nearby, a steal at \$1825.

Both are from Szczecin, 16km from Penkun, a shipbuilding boom town whose citizens can no longer afford to live there.

More and more Poles are buying property in eastern Germany and commuting to their homeland over what was once a tightly controlled border.

"I would pay at least four times this if I was fortunate enough to find anything similar on the outskirts of Szczecin," Mr Wojtysiak said. He expects to spend \$20,000 on his properties before he can move in.

Penkun is a picturesque village flanked by two lakes and a peach-coloured castle. Like most towns in former communist east Germany, it was renovated four years ago and has a modern sewage system and new power cables.

On the surface it does not look economically depressed. But the money spent on its revival has failed to stop two thirds of Penkuners moving elsewhere, leaving a third of houses empty.

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