



A piece of paradiso

Follow a few simple rules and you'll find the perfect Tuscan villa - or rural apartment - to rent.

You can't blame Frances (*Under The Tuscan Sun*) Mayes, I suppose. Or Elizabeth (*The Tuscan Year*) Romer or even Ferenc (*The Hills Of Tuscany*) Mate. After all, Eric (*A Small Place In Italy*) Newby was plastering the palazzo and dishing out the dolci as far back as 1967, and John (*Summer's Lease*) Mortimer was also guilty of proposing simple peasant life as the ultimate yuppie aspiration.

At least the first Queen Elizabeth did all she could to prevent her subjects from travelling abroad. They were all too likely to pick up wrong ideas about religion, as well as those vices at which foreigners were known to excel. But these days, the Chianti vineyards and Pisa's Field of Miracles swarm with upwardly anxious Anglo-Saxons busting to play bocce with bemused villagers and splash balsamic vinegar on their figs, then write books about it. How is this regarded by the locals? Read Dario Castagno's *Too Much Tuscan Sun*.

The *vita* is invariably *dolce* for chroniclers of Tuscan life, but usually because the romance of the marketplace and the olive grove outscores the head-banging frustration of trying to restore the derelict cowsheds with which most of them seem to fall head over heels in love. It makes much more sense to rent a villa and spend a month or even a week in Tuscany, rather than risk a year replacing a roof. Anyway, in peak periods most popular properties are available only by the traditional Saturday-to-Saturday week.

Follow a few simple rules and you'll be unlikely to pick a dud. Word of mouth is always the best bet, so ask around the cappuccino set - especially those wearing bandanas and impossibly chic shades, with Ducatis or Alfa Romeos waiting kerbside. Check out guide books, articles by people who've actually been there and done that, browse the internet and back-of-the-book advertisements in publications like this one.

But first of all, define the experience you're looking for. If it's excitement and glamour, it's best to opt for an apartment in Florence rather than an *agriturismo* (farmhouse), a brisk bike ride from Seggiano in the southern hills.

Avoid July and August, when Europeans take their holidays. They not only push prices through the roof, but they commonly book a year in advance. Tuscan farmhouses renting for \$4000 a week in July and August are likely to be \$1500 in late September and October. In the Tuscan midsummer, you'll also be looking for a property with airconditioning and a pool, but by September and October you can be more authentically rustic and save yourself a bundle. Couples should consider rural apartments as an alternative to a complete villa. Many owners have renovated a rambling farmhouse into a block of comfortable self-contained apartments, often with private outdoor terraces and a common pool.

Listings on the web generally fall into one of three categories: catalogue listings from established rental agencies, local or regional listings from syndicates of property owners, and single-property listings from individual owners. Established agencies have more options. They check out the properties and provide ratings and the most flattering of the reviews. They also allow more convenient payment options, such as credit card. But deal direct with owners, and you'll pay less.

Buzz McCarthy Cavalier and her husband, David Cavalier, are a Melbourne-based couple who own a villa named I Cinghiali (The Wild Boars) in Caprignana near Lucca. Their handbook is an entertaining 72-page read, and steers guests in the right direction for everything from hot mineral springs to an English-speaking dentist. I Cinghiali is located in the small hamlet of Caprignana, which comprises →



about 30 houses, a church, and a shop-cum-community social centre. The three-storey large stone structure – which has been renovated and extensively equipped – has three queen bedrooms, two with twin beds. There is a spacious and comfortable living room, a dining room large enough to seat 14, a kitchen with a double-oven stove, two fully tiled bathrooms, a laundry and two terraces. Couples or small families have the option of renting the studio apartment – real-estate parlance for a converted barn, which is, however, part of the main structure of the villa. Weekly summer rates are \$2600 for the villa and \$1000 for the studio apartment. Phone (03) 9822 9447, or visit www.italianexperience.com.au.

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Joe and Suzanne Byford's fine *agriturismo* La Casermetta sits high in the Chianti hills surrounded by olive groves and chestnut trees. The house has been extensively but sympathetically restored and has plenty of room for two families. There are two king-sized bedrooms with ensuites and two single rooms with a shared bathroom, but the heart and soul of the house is a well-equipped kitchen with a huge wooden table that invites all and sundry to share a hearty meal or a flask or two of the local classico. Accommodation can be extended by adding the downstairs apartment, which is only rented out with the house. The weekly rate is \$1800, or \$2500 with the apartment. The owners can be contacted on 0411 241 406 or by emailing casermetta@nsw.quik.com.au.

Melbourne accountant Ron Paoli operates six properties in historic San Gimignano. The one- to three-bedroom apartments range from \$1200 to \$2000 in high season (April to July), with 5 per cent and 10 per cent discounts in mid-season (August to November) and low season (December to March) respectively. Book ahead two weeks or more and you also receive a 10 per cent discount. And to add a personal touch, Ron's guests get his 24-hour telephone number for a prompt response to any query. Images of the apartments are available at www.ronpaoli.com.au/rentTuscany.htm.

When considering rental agencies, it is worth noting that those with local representatives offer a number of benefits, including paying in local currency to avoid shifty exchange rates, and being able to call around for frank discussions if there are any post-paradiso disputes. There have been good reports about New Zealand-based Italian Villa Holidays, which is the Australasian representative for the Cottages to Castles range of properties. The agency's principals handpick properties that have scored highly on location, quality and value. While historic destinations such as Florence, Siena, San Gimignano, Cortona and the Chianti wine region are

included in the Tuscany offerings, Italian Villa Holidays pays great attention to finding unspoiled towns and villages that don't do coach-tourism. It has found more than a few, too. Phone 1800 125 555 or visit www.italy.co.nz.

South Melbourne Travel's Invitation To Tuscany also offers an extensive range of properties – more than 130 villas and farmhouses mostly located in west central Tuscany and available on a weekly rental basis. It has villas that sleep two to 20 people, with high-season rentals ranging from about \$700 to \$14,350. A farmhouse accommodating four at the village of Casole d'Elsa in Siena pretty much captures the appeal of the *agriturismo* lifestyle, with home-produced wine, olive oil, honey, eggs and vegetables available on the estate. Another delicious prospect is an apartment within Castello di Vertine, a fortified hamlet near popular Gaiole-in-Chianti. The rental accommodation is a sensitive conversion of a detached stone barn – romantic, spacious and with great views over the valley to Radda. A picturesque pool area is cradled into the Chianti hillside. The apartment sleeps up to four, and weekly rental rates range from \$1235 to \$2060. Phone South Melbourne Travel on (03) 9690 2133 or visit www.smtravel.com.au. *

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