

How to book the best...

Italian villa holidays

Occasionally, an Italian “villa” may be just that: a luxurious retreat fit for a Medici. More usually, it is a converted farmhouse, a modern coastal property, an apartment in a larger rural complex (often with a shared pool) or an *agriturismo* (an apartment or small house on a farm or estate).

You will pay a premium for such accommodation in much of Tuscany and Umbria (see “Italy’s top five villa holidays”, below) because these are the regions with the idyllic – and often larger – properties, the historic towns, the pretty villages, the restaurants and the glorious countryside that most people seek.

In Tuscany, Chianti might seem the obvious choice – but if you are going to pay a Tuscan premium, head to the area around Montalcino and Pienza, which has finer landscapes, is easier to get around and has more charming small towns. Prices in Le Marche, a central Italian alternative, may be up to 25 per cent lower for similar properties, but the region has fewer historic towns and less captivating scenery.

Even better value can be found in the south, in Puglia, Calabria and Basilicata, but beware the hype, because the countryside here can be lacklustre, the coast overbuilt, and the towns modern and workaday. The heat can be overwhelming, too: summer temperatures touch 45C. It is cooler in mountainous northern Sardinia, where the village of San Pantaleo (see “Rustic Sardinia”, below) is ideal for a villa holiday.

In the north, there are the Piedmont hills, cheaper than the Lakes. In the south, the Cilento region south-east of Naples is less expensive than the Amalfi Coast. There are also the Sabine Hills near Rome, which have something of Umbria’s pastoral landscapes but none of its townscapes.

Sicily is becoming more popular,

but again, beware debilitating summer heat and avoid the rising prices around Taormina by looking at Cefalù, the Egadi and Aeolian Islands and scenic Monti Iblei in the south-east around Noto and Ragusa.

Alternatively, look to the Mugello region and Pratomagno, north and east of Florence respectively, both similar to Chianti but cheaper; ditto the Garfagnana, north of Lucca, and the coastal Maremma region in the south (though prices here are creeping up). The Lunigiana in the extreme north and around Monte Amiata in the south are cheapest of all, but they lack towns and countryside of real charm.

Should you book directly with the owner or through an agent? Using a reputable operator avoids the possibility of online scams and often means you have support before and during your trip, and redress after it if anything goes wrong. In any case, agents will have snapped up most of the best properties in all price ranges, especially in Tuscany.

Pricing across the country is sensitive to season, especially between June and August, when moving your holiday even a week can make a huge difference. Off-season flights and car hire should also cost less. The villa operator To Tuscany, for example, offers a Chianti property, Torretta Barbischio (sleeps six; private pool), for £1,947 in the last week of May 2014; a week later, in June, it costs £2,439. By the last week of June and through to August it is £3,249.

Yet both the weather and the countryside can be at their best in May and June – actually better than in August, which can be sultry and thundery. Average maximum temperatures in Siena, for example, are 73F (23C) and 80F (27C) in May and June, and a more challenging 88F (31C) in July and August.

Tim Jepson



4-CORNERS; CORBIS; ALAMY; REAL HOLIDAYS; LONG TRAVEL

Italy’s top five villa holidays

Unless otherwise stated, the prices below are per week in June.

1. A Tuscan classic

With its great sweep of cypress-spiked meadows, vineyards and olive groves, the Val d’Orcia is Tuscany at its most photogenic. The La Foce estate, home of contessa Benedetta Origo, is perfectly placed to take in the landscape’s full majesty. Although the area has a reputation as a summer hangout for VIPs, some of the restored



farmhouse villas on the estate are surprisingly affordable once you split the rent. An excellent find is the sunflower-yellow Villa Fontalgozzo, which would be perfect for a party of two couples and two to four children. From the swimming pool, you can spend all day admiring the famous zigzag cypress-lined road across the valley, the one that has launched a thousand Tuscany magazine features.

● Villa Fontalgozzo can be rented through Real Holidays (0207 359 3938; realholidays.co.uk) for £3,820 from mid-June to the end of August. Lee Marshall

2. Umbrian towns and villas

Choose the right location, and an Umbrian villa holiday can match anything you might find in Tuscany. The key is to book a property in exactly the right area, within reach of the best of the region's hill towns, ideally in the Perugia-Orvieto-Spoleto triangle, close to Todi, Montefalco, Trevi, Spello, Bevagna, Bettona and Assisi. The Italian villa bookings company Cottages to Castles has a good selection close to several of these charming towns, including many smaller one- and two-bedroom properties. It also has several that

are handy for less well-known centres such as Trevi and Bettona. A favourite among these is Il Roseto del Poggio, which sleeps four, in a pretty rural setting with its own swimming pool, close to Bettona. If you are less concerned with sightseeing, look at the often better-priced options in the hills flanking the Tiber valley in the north of the region, above Umbertide and Città di Castello.

Il Roseto del Poggio can be rented through Cottages to Castles (01622 775217; cottagescastles.com) from £610.

Tim Jepson

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3. Life in a trullo

Everybody wants to rent a trullo – one of those cone-topped traditional buildings which look so appealing scattered across the gently rolling countryside of Puglia. But you have to choose carefully. They were designed in many cases as rural storerooms rather than dwellings, so interiors are often cramped. Not so in Trullo Melograno, which is owned personally by Annie and Ray Long of Long Travel, a southern Italian specialist. A trullo complex rather than a single structure, Melograno has enough space inside for a cone-ceilinged dining room, living room,

kitchen and two double en-suite bedrooms, one of which has a lovely outside courtyard surrounded by drystone walls. There's a pool, shared with the Longs' next-door property, Trullo Noce.

● **Trullo Melograno** can be rented through Long Travel (01694 722193; long-travel.co.uk) from £1,395, including car hire. **Lee Marshall**

4. The undiscovered Tuscan border

Straddling the boundary between Tuscany and Liguria, the Lunigiana region is a fascinating area of deep river valleys, medieval castles, small

fishing villages and laid-back family beach resorts. More wooded than the Tuscan landscapes farther south, it is less frequented by tourists but has Byzantine-era villages, thermal waters and trekking paths worthy of exploration. The independent tour operator Merrion Charles really knows the Lunigiana inside out. If you are looking for rural seclusion, there is no better base than Charles's own house, Casa Glyn. With views over the Apuan Alps, it is a light and cheerful villa that sleeps five and features both a charming, lavender-fringed pool and an open-air hot tub.



From far left: lunch at Villa Casa d'Angelo in Puglia, where better-value properties can be found; a Tuscan villa at sunrise; and, above, an agriturismo in the same region; Trullo Melograno, below; Villa Fontalgotto, Tuscany; and alfresco dining in Piedmont, top right



Casa Glyn is available through Merrion Charles (0039 058 592098; merrioncharles.com) for €3,250/ £2,690. See Marshall

Rustic Sardinia

Surrounded by granite peaks, loftily detached from the jet-set pretensions of the island's Costa Smeralda, the village of San Pantaleo retains a smack of authenticity. It is a first choice for a villa holiday in Sardinia. The pick of the accommodation options is the Residence Rocce Sarde, less than two miles outside the village. It comprises 10 rustic-style

apartments, each with two double bedrooms, a kitchenette and a terrace, and sharing the use of a swimming pool. You can also use the facilities of the adjacent Rocce Sarde Hotel, including tennis courts, baby-sitting services and restaurants. San Pantaleo itself has bars, dining spots and a supermarket. The dramatic landscape of Gallura is on your doorstep, while the nearest beaches are a mile or two away.

Residence Rocce Sarde can be booked through Just Sardinia (01202 484858; justsardinia.co.uk) from £547.

Rob Andrews



COUNTRYWIDE

Cottages to Castles (01622 775217; cottagescastles.com) has been a pan-Italian specialist since 1983.

Housetrip (housetrip.com) is an online resource for direct villa rentals with booking safeguards.

Ilios Travel (01444 225633; iliostravel.com) has been offering luxury and other villas on the Italian islands for more than 30 years.

Real Holidays (020 7359 3938; realtholidays.co.uk) sources traditional and chic contemporary villas and apartments (and hotels) across central and southern Italy.

Wimco (0870 850 1144; wimco.com) specialises in Tuscany, Umbria and the Amalfi Coast.

TUSCANY AND UMBRIA

Bridgewater's Italy (0161 787 8587; bridgewatertravel.co.uk) is a family-run specialist for villas across Tuscany; it also has some options in Umbria, Puglia, the islands and Lakes.

Elysian Holidays (01580 766599; elysianholidays.co.uk) has around 20 Tuscan villas and a few options in the Lakes, Puglia and Liguria.

Invitation to Tuscany (020 8444 9500; invitationtotuscany.com) has more than 200 villas on its books, vetted and finessed over 30 years.

Sun-Hat (01522 889450; sun-hat-villas.com) offers a small selection of mid- and top-end villas in Chianti, the Maremma and close to Florence.

To Tuscany (0121 288 7782; to-tuscany.com) stands out by virtue of an excellent website, with floor plans, detailed information and images across a wide range of villas.

Traditional Tuscany (01945 430055; traditionaltuscany.co.uk) is run by a husband-and-wife team who inspect every property. It also has properties in Umbria, Lazio and Le Marche.

Other regional specialists

Long Travel (01694 722193; long-travel.co.uk) offers a wide range of villas and other self-catering options.

Think Sicily (020 7377 8518; thinksicily.com) has many quality villas across the island.

Solo Sicily (020 7097 1413; solosicily.com)

Freelance Holidays (01789 297705; freelance-holidays.co.uk)

Sardinian Places (0845 330 2049; sardinianplaces.co.uk)

Just Sardinia (01202 484858; justsardinia.co.uk)

Venetian Apartments (020 3356 9667; venice-rentals.com) has everything from studios to a "Prestige Collection" of palazzi.

LUXURY

CV Travel (020 7401 1099; cvtravel.co.uk) focuses on Tuscany and Umbria.

Abercrombie & Kent (0845 618 2205; akvillas.com)

Red Savannah (01242 787800; redsavannah.com)

Simpson Exclusive (020 8392 5878; simpsonexclusive.com)

S J Villas (020 7589 4390; sjvillas.co.uk)

Tuscany Now (020 7684 8884; tuscanynow.com)

Wolf Worster (07967 091766; wolfworster.com)

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