

Surfing for villas

You've always dreamed of spending a year in Provence, but can only spare two weeks. What to do? Rent a villa, of course

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Not long ago, a friend and I, seduced by the description offered on the owner's website, rented a villa in Provence. It sounded perfect: two bedrooms nestled in a 17th-century estate complete with swimming pool, barbecue and amenities including a dishwasher, microwave and TV.

On arrival, our thoughts of fresh baguettes and rolling fields of lavender quickly disappeared. The two-bedroom "villa" turned out to be a one-bedroom apartment with a pullout couch. Incredibly, the dishwasher was built into the stove--we opted to hand wash--and the tiny black and white television came with three local channels and poor reception.

Despite these letdowns, we were charmed by the authenticity of the experience. Activities that we'd only read about in books--truffle digs, wine harvests and games of boules--were within arm's reach. The property provided easy access to the kind of day-to-day stuff that we might not have encountered if we were just passing through.

Thanks to the internet, your own European experience is closer than you might think. Making the experience as worry-free as possible, however, requires some serious legwork.

Start by picking a destination. Do you want to overlook the Amalfi Coast, or stay in a chic Parisian apartment in the 8th arrondissement? Next, determine a budget. Prices vary widely depending on the popularity of a destination and the season. Properties in Provence and Tuscany in July and August, for instance, are rented at a premium. Book in the off-season and save from 35% to 50%.

Once a locale, a price range and dates have been decided on, head to the internet to find a property management company. Look for one that has experience in the business and a staff that not only handpick properties but regularly visit them to ensure they're up to snuff.

When you find a property you like, don't be afraid to ask questions. Reputable management companies should be happy to address any concerns, be it the state of the appliances or the location of the nearest grocery store. If need be, ask if the company can help with additional services like car rentals, airport transfers or babysitting. Most importantly, ensure that there will be an on-site contact who can provide assistance in the event of an emergency.

Also, consider contacting the owner of the property. Take Michele Castaldo, whose two-bedroom Villetta Mimma Vittoria in the Calabria region of Italy is a rare find. Representing a marriage of Castaldo's ancestry (the property has been in his family for generations) and his artsy, big-city tastes (based in New York, Castaldo is an award-winning musician and record producer), the ancient townhouse is equipped with modern luxuries such as stainless-steel appliances, a rain-forest shower and air conditioning. After only one year in operation, it is already more than 70% booked for the 2004 season. Castaldo credits his property's popularity to word of mouth and the extensive collection of photographs posted on his website.

Castaldo is only too happy to answer the questions of potential guests and to deal with any deficiencies. "Running the family villa is an exciting and passionate venture for me, so I want to get it right," he says. "I did a lot of research before started renting the place to find out what people were looking for in a rental. I also keep in touch with all my clients after their stay. If anything can be improved, I want to know about it." Sixty days prior to their arrival, Castaldo's clients, who have included top executives and airline pilots, receive a package containing maps, brochures, itineraries, photos, a currency converter chart and a CD of Italian music. Once there, they can also get the inside scoop from Castaldo's Italian relatives, who are always happy to drop by and offer general travel tips or recommend the best places to sample local cuisine.

Finally, before booking any property, carefully scour the terms and conditions of the rental agreement. Look for hidden costs such as surcharges for bed sheets and towels, cleaning services and telephone fees. Find out if the rental deposit is non-refundable and whether an additional cash-only security deposit is required upon arrival.

Looking back on it, my friend and I should have prepared better for our holiday in Provence. But while we were caught off guard by the antiquated appliances, we also didn't expect Peggy, an English expat who knocked on our door one morning to chat. She was our most pleasant surprise. Within five minutes, she had us fully briefed on the village gossip and had provided directions to some of the local beaches that we may have otherwise missed. Who needs a 24-hour concierge when you can have a nosy neighbour?

Trip tips

Where to book

- Rentvillas.com. Listings often include reviews from previous guests, including helpful hints under headings such as "unpleasant surprises."
- Barclayweb.com. An easily navigable on-line catalogue with lots of photos to help find everything from an Irish cottage to a villa in Crete.
- Lacure.com. The website of a Toronto-based company shows off a collection of luxurious European villas. Prices (quoted per night) are clearly displayed, and amenities range from private pools and gardens to full-time staff.
- Villeinitalia.com Features Italian properties only, sorted by region and type (luxury, seaside, town centre and lakeside). If your preferred rental is not available, helpful staff will suggest comparable alternatives.
- Athomeinfrance.com French country rentals and Parisian apartments that have been personally inspected by savvy property management staff who can answer questions and suggest itineraries.

The best

PROVENCAL CHATEAU

Set in more than 10 acres of fruit orchards and olive trees in France's Luberon region, the late 19th-century Mas de la Fougasse features four bedrooms and three bathrooms. Inside, the décor is a tasteful mix of pastoral-meets-Parisian. Outside, a stone terrace and pool are a comfortable spot to while away the hours. From \$5,732 per week for eight people. At Home in France,

ITALIAN SEASIDE VILLA

- Standing cliffside overlooking Italy's Amalfi Coast, Villa Oliviero has views that stretch from the pastel-hued houses of Positano below, across to the azure waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea. Adorned with mosaic tiles and white stucco walls, the property includes an expansive garden terrace (with a private pool) and a small wine cellar. Accessible only by foot, be prepared to hike. A baggage-carrying service is available to ease the muscle strain. From \$14,151 per week for 10 people. Ville in Italia,

LONDON TOWNHOUSE

- Belsize Grove, an elegant Victorian penthouse flat, was once occupied by English actress Dame Peggy Ashcroft. Take in the views of London from the roof terrace. Walk through the posh north London enclave of Belsize Park to leafy Regent's Park or the shops and restaurants of Hampstead High Street. From \$881 per day for six people. Barclay International Group,

For Less

- Near the historic town of Arles, Domaine de la Tourette (left) is an ancient farmhouse conversion owned by Brigitte and Philippe Saltiel. A long gravel drive framed by cypress trees leads to six fully equipped apartments, each named after a famous painter who once lived in the region. The Saltiels can arrange biking trips, cooking courses and four-wheel-drive safaris in the nearby Camargue nature park. From \$390 per week for two people and \$1,090 per week for eight people.

- Michele Castaldo's two-storey Villetta Mimma Vittoria is conveniently located a short walk from the centre of port village Gioia Tauro and one kilometre from the beaches of Reggio Calabria's north shore. Visit the website to ogle more than 150 photos that show off the property's exposed beam ceilings, terra-cotta floors and Zen-like design. Personal touches include a welcome basket filled with local goodies. From \$781 USD per week for four people

917-330-7271, <http://www.villettamimmavittoria.com>

- Book with Residence Apartments and stay in London's toniest neighbourhoods--Notting Hill, St. John's Wood, Kensington--at a fraction of the cost of a hotel room. From studios to three-bedrooms, all properties are immaculately maintained, and rates include extras such as utilities and cleaning. Minimum stay is one week, and discounts are offered for long stays. From \$914 per week.

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