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What's it really like to rent a villa in Italy?



Katherine Rodeghier/Katherine Rodeghier

Our group enjoyed drinks on the terrace of our villa, Sasso Canaldo, an old stone farmhouse near Lucignano.



Photos by Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor/Katherine Rodeghier

The colorful bridge, Ponte Vecchio, can be seen from the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.



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Strolling around the Piazza del Campo is a favorite pastime in Siena.



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The bell tower of the duomo in Florence glows in soft, muted colors.

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Friends for more than 40 years, we were empty nesters and free to travel the world, together. For years we talked about renting a villa in Tuscany — the subject often coming up at our children's weddings — but it remained a pipe dream.

Then Fred died. As we watched our dear friend succumb to pancreatic cancer, we realized the chance to take the trip with him had slipped away. His passing was a wake-up call. No more talk. We're going.

We hit the Internet, exploring rental options from several agencies, and decided on a four-bedroom villa just outside Lucignano. With an outdoor pool, a sunny terrace and olive groves trailing down the hillside, this old stone farmhouse was just right for four couples.

Though a few centuries old, decorated shabby chic with beds of varying levels of comfort, the villa was our humble home for one memorable week in autumn. Not that we spent much time there.

Every day we set off exploring. The guys insisted on doing the driving, but even with four of them hovering over maps like generals planning an invasion, we managed to get lost.

Often we'd circle the roundabout intersections in Tuscan villages two, even three times, laughing through a maneuver we came to call a "whoop-de-do."

Eventually, we'd reach our destination. We lunched on the piazza in Montepulciano, sipped Chianti in Chianti, visited the churches of Siena, and strolled on cobblestones in countless little towns, popping into shops to buy wine, cheese, souvenirs. We took the train from Arezzo to Florence to avoid heavy traffic and parking nightmares and hired a guide to show us Michelangelo's *David*. We marveled at the masterpieces in the Uffizi Gallery.

Taking a break from dining out, we hired a cook who prepared a memorable dinner for us in the villa. At breakfast we took turns in the kitchen, though we often deferred to our friend Bill, an excellent cook.

Our only conflict came during the daily "hair-dryer emergencies." Only one of us had an adapter plug that worked with the villa's ancient wiring. Unfortunately, the plug also was needed for the coffeemaker, so it was either morning coffee for the guys or styled hair for gals. The squabbles were all good-natured and we laugh about them to this day.

How to pick a villa

Renting a villa has several advantages, and a few pitfalls.

A villa certainly will be roomier and offer more privacy than a hotel. The per-person cost works out to be cheaper, too, particularly if you avoid the high summer season. A rental in late April to mid-May or in October and November could be half the cost of one in July. With a kitchen, you'll also save on meals, and having a washer and dryer means you can pack less and avoid excess luggage fees.

You'll need to stay at least a week, though, the standard minimum booking.

Choose a reputable villa rental agent, one that deals with a lengthy roster of properties and has been in business for many years. We booked our villa, Sasso Canaldo, through Sophisticated Italy, sophisticateditaly.com, a destination management company owned by an American couple, former diplomats posted in Italy and now based in Milan.

Other companies to consider include HomeAway, homeaway.com and vrbo.com; Homebase Abroad, homebaseabroad.com; Villas of Distinction, villasofdistinction.com; and Abercrombie & Kent Villas, akvillas.com.

If you want customized tours, a cook, groceries prestocked or help with renting a car, choose a company that offers these services.

You'll need to book your villa well in advance and pay a deposit. It's customary to pay in full before arrival and a security deposit often is required. Cancellation policies are stricter than those for hotel stays. Get all of these details and rental rules in writing.

You know how the descriptions of houses in real-estate ads tend to paint a picture rosier than reality? Villa descriptions are no different, so scale back any fairy-tale expectations.

You won't have maid service, so you'll all need to pick up after yourselves. Many villas in Tuscany don't come with air conditioning or Internet access. And remember that you can't just call down to the front desk if there's a problem. Get a name and phone number for a local contact who can help with questions or emergencies.

What would we have done differently? We would have spent more time enjoying the villa rather than running around trying to see all the sights. A two-week rental would have been so much more relaxing than one. We so enjoyed having a cook one evening, we wish we had booked her for a second night.

And we would have packed more adapter plugs.

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<http://www.dallasnews.com/lifestyles/travel/international/20160505-whats-it-really-like-to-rent-a-villa-in-italy.ece>