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### **Cottage Fervor in Tuscany**

**In the hills of Tuscany, a family discovers that living like a local can be a joy. Except when it isn't.**

By Pamela Gerhardt

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The plan: Rent a cottage for a week in northern Tuscany. On the Internet, we find a place that seems strategically located – a few feet from the Apuan Alps National Park for breathtaking hikes, a 20-minute drive to Lucca for medieval and Romanesque architecture, a half-hour drive to Pisa for one very famous tower and Pinocchio puppets, a 1½-hour drive to the Italian Mediterranean coast for cliff walks and sun, and a two-hour drive to Florence for everything else.

My husband, 4-year-old son, auto-phobic baby and I leave Washington with the best intentions: take in only one "sight" a day, hike, cook fresh food, hang with the locals, put the kids to bed early, sip Chianti every evening under the chestnut trees.

Right.

In our rented Scenic, we scramble for 30 minutes up a mountain road wide enough for one car but used as a two-laner. The trick is to keep the car from tumbling down the steep mountain.

Rocking with each hairpin curve, I read aloud the directions e-mailed from the cottage owner. "There is a Tamoil station on your left and a sign for Pescaglia directing you to the left into a road that, judging from the sign, appears to be no entry. Take this road which crosses the brook Pedogna," I read with great purpose, speaking over the Disney narrator booming from "Dinosaur" on my son's portable cassette player. *A meteor strikes the Earth destroying your home. It sends you searching for a new place to live.*

We barely register the stunning views of hills draped in olive groves. We've been in second gear for 20 minutes. Finally we spot the sign for our village: Gello.

We park in front of the ancient church and tumble out. Above us are maybe 10 stone houses, clinging to the hillside, appearing as one jagged, colorful villa.

I'm instantly self-conscious. They know. We're here. The Americans.

The only Italian we know is buon giorno, despite my heritage; we chose this area partially because my grandfather, a native Luccan, surely walked these hills.

Down some stone steps, we find our house, No. 13. Locked. A young man comes out of a nearby door in flip-flops, smiles warmly, says something. My mind slips into Spanish, then French for the word "key."

The villagers do not speak English. Not "hello." Not "okay." We knew this.

But the Internet made the house sound secluded, a place where you could sing bad opera at the top of your lungs. Suddenly, in a village where we can hear everyone's dinner conversation and the clinking of dishwashing, the language and cultural differences present an uncomfortable barrier.

Finally, a woman two houses above appears with the giant skeleton key. Speaking rapid-fire Italian, she shows us the living area, crowded with a large table, a small refrigerator, a tiny propane stove, a loveseat and a colossal breakfront. There is a small stone sink in one corner. She points out the stove's fuel tank, the matches, the automatic clothes washer that must be hooked up to the sink. She throws open the heavy kitchen windows and lets in the fall breeze. "Capire?" Understand?

My eyes land on an unopened bottle of vino, a gift from the owner. "Si."

That night, large loping mosquitoes float in through the window. We pull the nets, hanging above the beds, around our children and ourselves.

The church bell tower, next to our cottage, erupts every half-hour. All day. All night. I like it. I sleep right through. My husband wakes with every toll.

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Don't book yourself a house in Tuscany – or anywhere rural – with fantasies about melding into the local culture and going home with flowers in your hair and a pocketful of future pen pals. I knew this. I also knew I would leave with more than I thought I would. Be patient, I told myself. Observe.

We drive down the mountain in search of groceries, unsure if Esselunga, the super-store in nearby Marlia, will be open on a Sunday morning. It is. We drive back up the mountain with beautiful, affordable food: salsiccia (sausage), fresh mozzarella, basil, olive oil, bread, pastries, a tub of fresh pesto, fresh gnocchi, sliced meats, Nutella for the kids, and several jugs of mineral and plain water. Oh, and lots of Chianti.

At the cottage, we struggle to translate the ingredients on the \$20 can of powdered baby formula. Church bells ring. I want to attend Mass, but the baby needs to eat. The bells fall silent. Too late.

My son retreats merrily to "his" room, equipped with bunk beds, books and his personal mosquito net.

Unlike other cottages we've rented, other places we've visited, he never ventures outside. There's no real yard. Beyond that, I suspect he senses the odd juxtaposition. Isolation, but no privacy.

We hike into Apuan Alps National Park and find mountain views, ancient stone farmhouses and many wild boar hunters carrying large rifles. Gunfire rings out. I realize not one of us is wearing bright colors. I'm grateful for our 1-year-old's loud human noises. At one point, we nearly stumble on a young man sitting on a rock, casually pointing a pistol into the blue autumn sky. Beyond him, a group of picnickers lounge around a card table set with a perfectly civilized antipasto.

A charming older couple gather a hat full of chestnuts and we do the same. Later, we roast them, clueless about the proper temperature or cooking length. They turn out hard and dry and sit on the windowsill all week. For dinner, we burn the salsiccia to a crisp on the difficult stove.

We see villagers plucking tomatoes and basil from family gardens that fan out beneath our windows. We learn to say buona sera. Good evening.

After dishes rinsed in the stone sink, we hook up the clothes washer, struggling with the Italian operating manual. The load is finished by midnight.

Until well past 11, we listen to the clinking of glasses and laughter of children coming from our neighbors' verandas that overlook the dense, green hills. The distant lights of Lucca twinkle below.

The next day we walk around Lucca, thrilled with the walled city and its handsome, bicycle-riding citizens. I dart into the church of San Frediano and find Lucca's saint, Santa Zita, a mummified corpse dressed as a nun lying in a glass case. We window-shop along narrow Via Fillungo and buy gelato. We visit the town's 13th-century bell tower, and the ticket woman plays peekaboo with the kids. We eat bread on the stone steps of the Piazza San Michele.

Back in Gello, the setting sun casts the hills in gold. We walk the narrow paths and find that the village is larger than we'd thought, that 20 more houses cling to the hill beyond the church. An attractive man in a suit, returning home from his work in the world below, swings his briefcase and a loaf of bread and playfully says "Ciao!" to my son, who has bumped into him while skipping backward. At the highest peak of the village, I'm startled to see the Mediterranean Sea, miles away, sparkling under the harvest moon.

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Another day, we drive 1½ hours to Cinque Terre, the astonishing series of five ancient villages tucked into the cliffs 500 to 1,000 feet above the Mediterranean, connected by an 11-mile footpath. The idea: Walk a few miles. Have lunch. Walk to the next

village. Glass of wine. And so on.

The kids hate it. The baby wants out of her backpack. The 4-year-old is tired. It's incredibly hot for fall. Tourists crowd the footpath and the few restaurants. But at the end of the day, we're very grateful for having seen something rare and beautiful, and before we climb into the car we pause and watch the blue sea lap at the shores of the ancient fishing village. We want to remember it.

Of course, we have to go to Pisa, too. There, Italian college students sit in circles on the lush grass of Campo Dei Miracoli (Field of Miracles) and smoke cigarettes and make jokes under the shade of the famous tower and the nearby Romanesque cathedral and baptistry. We marvel at the hike to the top of the dome and walk its internal parameter. We buy puppets and little plastic cameras with views inside, and keep turning back to the tower, smiling at its white, Romanesque beauty and whimsical tilt. Our son talks about Pisa for the rest of the week.

On the way home, past olive groves, Romanesque bell towers and rows of lovely cyprus trees that jut from the landscape like giant swaying plumes, I see light glowing from a tiny, walled graveyard in the dusk. "Stop!" I tell my husband, even though the kids clearly need to be in bed.

I climb out and creak open the iron gates. Before me are maybe 50 graves – large, flat slates a few inches above ground, inscribed with names and dates. Photos of the deceased are embossed in stone picture frames, which sit upright on each grave as if on a piano back home. The source of the glow: Each stone is eternally lit by a small electric bulb encased in a carved glass "flame." It feels warm. Then spooky. I quietly click the gate shut.

I return in the daylight with my son. We find that the graves date only to the 1800s. One grave, the size of an infant, covered with loose dirt, is dated the previous week. "Let's go," I tell my son. We have no business being there.

On the way up, through the thick trees, we stumble on a steep path that leads to a secret bocce court in the woods. A locked shed holds the equipment, stored away for the winter. I imagine villagers playing here summer evenings, the laughter, the fireflies as the families walk the steep hill back home.

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After the short drive to Pisa, the next morning we're ready for the bigger adventure of Florence. There, we're surrounded by English-speaking tourists discussing the five or six museums they will see that day. We see the Duomo and Baptistry, then begin to wait in the long line (in October!) to see Michelangelo's David; after an hour, an official tells the entire line to move to a different door. I feel a little bit like crying.

But later, at a cafe in the Piazza della Signoria, we're surrounded by statues, including an exact copy of David. Someone in the crowd is playing a mandolin, pigeons flutter in the sunlight, and we swoon a bit, overcome by the lyrical beauty.

We spend our final day back in Lucca, and walk through the park on top of the walls, built long after the city, in the 16th and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, to keep out the enemy – Florentines. Gold and crimson leaves scatter around joggers and bicyclists. You could lose yourself here. You could stay.

My grandfather left for the United States at age 20, and I imagine he must have privately pined for his home.

Back in Gello, as we start to pack to leave, my husband "shops" at the panel truck that stops outside the church once a week, bringing canned goods and toilet paper and Windex to the village. He doesn't buy anything but gets to say both hello and arrivederci to the villagers, who until now we haven't seen much of.

The next morning it's pouring rain, the first all week. We lug our stuff up the steep path, bag by bag, back into the Scenic. We check under the beds. We turn out the lights. We pile into the car.

Suddenly, from beneath an umbrella a neighbor appears. She's wearing a simple, knee-length wool skirt, high gardening boots, a floral blouse. I've seen her during the week, wearing the same clothes, walking past our house down the hill with a basket on her arm. She smiles and holds out her hand.

The key.

She begins to walk away, then pauses, turns to me as if she knows me, the laundry, the burned dinners, and says, I think with empathy, "Buon viaggio." Good journey.

I've learned a bit about living in the hills of northern Italy. I take that with me. But I also leave something behind – the expectation that any life can be experienced in just a week.

*Pamela Gerhardt last wrote for Travel on New Year's Eve in Ely, Minn.*

### **DETAILS: Tuscan Cottage**

GETTING THERE: Fly into Pisa and rent a car. United, Air France and British Airways offer connecting service from the D.C. area; round-trip fares start at \$630, with restrictions. Or skip the layovers and fly directly from Dulles to Milan and drive. Just remember: The drive will take several hours, and after an eight-hour-plus flight, you will be filling out paperwork at the airport, loading up the car, staring at a foreign dashboard and struggling with unfamiliar road signs.

GETTING AROUND: If you stay outside city limits, you'll need a car (for more information on car rentals, see story on Page E12).

For general information about driving in Italy, try [www.ideamerge.com/motoeuropa/guide.html](http://www.ideamerge.com/motoeuropa/guide.html). Tolls are numerous on the autostradas, but nearly all of the booths take American credit cards. Italy requires an international driver's permit, which you can obtain through many rental car agencies and AAA.

WHERE TO STAY: Numerous Web sites advertise cottages in Tuscany. Many are privately managed and operated by the owners; others are privately owned but managed by a travel company; and some are corporate- owned and -managed. Prices vary dramatically depending on location and season.

I don't recommend bringing very young children to remote locations, but childless couples minding their budget might enjoy Fontana del Prete (011-44- 1925-762194, [www.dunbar-i-l.demon.co.uk/1stpage.htm](http://www.dunbar-i-l.demon.co.uk/1stpage.htm)), where I stayed in Gello. The house, like many in the area, is a cozy, rustic cottage in the hills north of Lucca. During high season, from late June until late August, the rate is about \$424 a week; at other times, about \$250.

For something less secluded, consider Andia Paradiso (011-39-0573-67- 78-34, [www.Lazzi.it/andia/index\\_e.htm](http://www.Lazzi.it/andia/index_e.htm), between Lucca and Florence in the town of Pistoia. Managed by the Lazzi Group, the resort includes a mountain lodge with apartments (don't worry, there's also a restaurant if you don't want to cook). In high season, apartments for four run about \$403 per week.

Nearby Battifolle Villas

([www.knowital.com/properties/lucca/html2/battifolle\\_rental1.html](http://www.knowital.com/properties/lucca/html2/battifolle_rental1.html)), 1¼ miles from the town of Collodi, includes two 16th-century cottages for about \$358 per week in low season, \$425 in high.

For a comprehensive listing of rental properties (including photos) in and around Lucca, go to [www.knowital.com](http://www.knowital.com) and click on "Lucca and the coast" on the left side. I was dubious because you have to e-mail the owners for prices, directions, etc., but in a test run, all three owners I e-mailed replied within a few hours.

INFORMATION: Start with the Italian Tourist Office (212-245-4822, [www.italiantourism.com](http://www.italiantourism.com)).

For more specific details on Lucca, check with the town's tourist office (011-39-0583-491-205), or go to [www.itwg.com/cities.asp](http://www.itwg.com/cities.asp) and click on "Lucca." Another site teeming with tourist info is [www3.mistral.co.uk/latrobe/itlav7.htm](http://www3.mistral.co.uk/latrobe/itlav7.htm).

Pisa maintains a well-organized site at [www.pisaonline.it](http://www.pisaonline.it), which includes a guide to attractions, shopping and restaurants.

For Cinque Terre, try [www.abcnews.go.com/sections/travel/Europhiles/cinque.html](http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/travel/Europhiles/cinque.html) (for a slide show of the area) or [http://home.sunrise.ch/avong/cinque\\_terre](http://home.sunrise.ch/avong/cinque_terre), a very good, general-purpose Web site on the area. But don't believe the sales pitch about being away from the "throngs."

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## **What You Need to Know Before Renting a Home**

By Pamela Gerhardt  
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Fumbling with operating instructions for a French dishwasher on your vacation might send you screaming for a deluxe hotel. But think again. Highlights you can't find in most hotels: Relaxing with your spouse in front of a blazing fireplace, chatting with workers in the vineyards outside your door, and helping the kids make "witch's stew" out of marjoram, grapes, pebbles and plums – plucked from beyond your bedroom window.

My family and I have stayed in seven homes (six in three regions of France and one in Italy), each for one week, and we wouldn't trade the experiences for anything, despite one tough-ish week in Italy. And we're not alone. Most people who rent a cottage or villa in Europe swear they'll never go the way of hotels again. (A "villa," by the way, can range in size from a small house to a large estate; "cottage" usually means a small house, often with two or three bedrooms and one bath.)

"We've never had a negative experience," says Durant Imboden, who operates [Europeforvisitors.com](http://Europeforvisitors.com), a travel guide with info on everything from how to apply for an international drivers license to tips for renting cottages/villas. He and his family have rented dozens of homes in Austria, Denmark, Germany and elsewhere.

So where do you begin? Few, if any, comprehensive books devoted to European rentals are currently in print. And while some companies continue to issue catalogues, more are becoming dependent on the Internet. Why? You can view photos, get prices and check availability within minutes.

But before you send a check to someone who claims to own a holiday home in the South of France, here are a few things to consider:

- Choose between broker and property owner. First-time renters might want to go through a broker or agent, whose customer service department can offer advice, rather than dealing directly with the owner, especially if there are language issues. Even then, though, "know who you are dealing with," says Harry Barclay, president of Barclay International, which specializes in high-end properties in several countries. Call the tourist board of the country you are visiting and ask about the broker's reputation,

how long the company has been in business and whether complaints have been registered.

For our stays in France, my family went both routes, going through Gites de France, a respected broker, and dealing directly with an owner. Both methods worked, although both had their little surprises.

One of those surprises: Although we could view the Gites de France Web site in English, the contracts arrived by mail in French. We ended up buying a computer translator for about \$45. Still, one week before our departure, having not received final confirmation from the company even though we'd sent them credit card information, we discovered that they were waiting to hear from us.

Another surprise: An owner we found on the Internet in the Dordogne informed us upon our departure that there was an additional charge for cleaning the house. Because of language barriers, we had misunderstood, and barely had enough cash to pay her.

- Heed the ratings. Houses listed with brokers are categorized under a ratings system -- one to five stars or corn stalks or something similar. "The ratings are really very accurate, rather than based on someone's whim," says Debra Steitz, of Debra Steitz Travel Group, which specializes in European cottage rentals. "As for the homeowners, who don't follow the system, they sometimes know more about farming than they do about the rental business. If working on your own through the Internet, you might have a big miscommunication about what constitutes 'nice' or 'modern.' "

- Research the location. "The greatest risk, if there is one, involves location," says Imboden. "You can end up quite isolated."

"The Internet might say the house is five kilometers to [Pisa]," says Steitz. But "if those miles are up a mountain on a twisting road, you've added an extra half-hour to your driving time, up and down the same road twice a day, no matter where you go." Ask the owner, via e-mail, for an accurate description of the property's location and road conditions (most sites list the owner's address, or a broker can provide one). Tell them your concerns and needs.

- Beware of hidden costs. Expect surprises, largely due to language mix-ups. Europeans often charge extra for utilities, linens and cleaning services, which usually must be paid for in cash (you generally pay the rent in advance with a credit card). It's a good idea to bring about \$250 in local currency to cover such expenses as cleaning (about \$40 a week), linens (about \$2 per towel or sheet) and security deposit, generally due upon arrival (about \$100, returned when you leave).

Phone service, if it exists, can be tricky. The owner chooses how to charge you -- by outgoing calls only, both incoming and outgoing, or local calls. None of our seven rentals offered long-distance service.



- Beware of brochure-speak. Overall, we have not found huge discrepancies between what we saw or read on the Web and what we've gotten. In fact, nearly all of the French houses were far nicer than we expected. But renting sight-unseen is inherently risky, and you just can't know what the road and yard and view will look like until you get there. Photos can be deceiving: Our Italian cottage looked as if it had a great view, and it did -- but only from the second-floor bedroom window.
- Shift your sensibilities. Remember that European priorities are different from ours, and don't get snarky if your cottage's furniture consists of a small, uncomfortable couch or chair. Instead, you might find three dining tables -- one outside, one in the kitchen, one in the dining room. There might not be a microwave, but there will be two eight-place dining services and more than one salad spinner.
- Remember the small stuff. Pack such necessities as matches (to light the stove and fireplace), dish soap, flashlight and some food for the first night. It might be a hike to the nearest store, and operating hours vary.
- Expect to meet the owner. All but one owner greeted us with a bottle of wine from their private caves and a basket of goodies. Expect your visit to be highly personal. The owner may speak a little English. Muddle through. And shrug and point a lot.

You'll be surprised by how much you pick up. In our fifth week abroad, we ordered food from a restaurant menu and I remarked, "I can't believe the menus were in English." They weren't.

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## **Where to Go in the European Countryside**

Hundreds of rental sites on the Internet lure you with tantalizing descriptions and photos of the European countryside. A cottage set among the Vouvray vineyards in western France. An Italian villa tucked beneath chestnut trees. Where should you go, especially the first time? We asked the experts and reviewed our travel notes, and arrived at the following consensus.

But don't forget the cities. In Paris, for example, you can rent an apartment for a week or four-day weekend for a fraction of the price of a hotel. "Not only do you save money, but you get a sense of having lived there," says Durant Imboden of Europeforvisitors.com, an online European travel guide.

In Venice, generations of Italians have kept apartments in the city that they rent out to tourists. "Beyond the attraction of the city's obvious beauty, we rented a three-bedroom, 1½-bath apartment with a private courtyard last Easter weekend for just \$1,000,"

bragged Imboden.

But back to our countryside fantasy.

## France

France's Dordogne, Provence and Loire Valley regions are packed with rental properties orchestrated by well-organized brokers and homeowners.

- The Dordogne: Rolling green hills, Cro-Magnon cave etchings, canoeing on the river, dozens of castles, foie gras. "Best of all, the Dordogne is compact," says Debra Steitz, of Debra Steitz Travel Group, an agency that specializes in European cottage rentals. "You can see a lot without traveling too far from your home base." Best town to be near: Sarlat, a restored medieval city and favorite among the French, bursts with markets and cafes.
- Provence: Rolling scrubby hills, stunning Roman ruins, van Gogh's blue skies and yellow sunflowers, day trips to the Mediterranean. Best town to be near: Avignon, centrally located, a street-fest-filled city of winding streets.
- Loire Valley: Agricultural heartland, fields of sunflowers, Joan of Arc history, dozens of France's largest Renaissance chateaus and a few castles, including Loches. Best town to be near: Tours, a college town with a medieval central plaza that buzzes every night with drinkers and diners; or Amboise, a postcard-perfect little city that sparkles at night on the banks of the Loire. "People who want to visit the Loire region often believe you must move from town to town, but you can easily stay near Tours [or Amboise] and take day trips," says Steitz.

## Italy

Italy and France "rank high on most Americans' lists, and it's far easier to rent houses through agencies than in, say, Austria or Switzerland, where a more do-it-yourself effort may be required," says Imboden.

- Tuscany. There are more rentals here than in other Italian regions, plus the climate is less hot and dry than in the south. And the nearby sites – day trips to the sea or mountains, Pisa, Florence and other Romanesque wonders – are fairly close together. Best town to be near: Lucca, a walled city where citizens ride bikes and claim Puccini as their native son.

But note that several experts warn against Lucca's surrounding steep hills for first-time renters: too much time spent driving around.

- Umbria is an alternative area with cheaper prices than Tuscany and similar but drier terrain that includes historically and architecturally significant towns such as Siena, a major European city in the Middle Ages. Best town to be near: Assisi, a good

base with many restaurants that is near Perugia, capital of Umbria; many medieval towns such as Spoleto, home of the Festival dei Due Mondi, held every June and July; and water sports on Lake Trasimeno.

- Maremma is an up-and-coming area, just south of Livorno and west of Siena along the coast, that offers Mediterranean views and cheaper prices. Best town to be near: Roccastrada, a quaint medieval town in the hills north of Grosseto, the region's largest and busiest city. Steitz recommends renting a house near Parco Naturale della Maremma, in the Uccellina mountains, where you can explore flora and find wild boar, horses and cattle. Take a day trip to Pitigliano, a hill town built on a plateau of limestone cliffs pocked with caves.

## Spain and Portugal

- "Portugal is sort of an unknown haven," says Steitz. "You get similar scenery to what you find in the Dordogne or Tuscany, but much cheaper prices." The best areas are to the north and south of the bustling capital of Lisbon. Best towns to be near, north/central: Caparica (beaches) and Mafra. Best town to be near, south: Anywhere along Costa Azul, one of the peninsula's least-developed beach regions that offers horse-riding holidays, says J.G. Ross, who edits Spainforvisitors.com, a travel Web site that covers both countries.

- For Spain, Steitz recommends inland areas south of Madrid. "Most people think of renting a condo along the Mediterranean, but just south of Madrid you can find charming farmhouses for rent on landscapes similar to the Dordogne," she says. Ross recommends the Toledo province, with its dramatic, sheer-drop mountain driving through thick forests. Best town to be near: Toledo, capital of medieval Spain, teetering on a rocky mound surrounded by a deep gorge.

## England

England is the No. 1 draw for first-time renters, for the obvious reason: The villa owners and townspeople speak your language. "Especially good for the nervous or less adventurous," says Imboden. Rental homes are plentiful – the rental cottage was practically invented here. Experts recommend the Cotswolds area of England, west of London and beyond, with rolling hills dotted with gray stone houses, Neolithic history at Stonehenge and Avebury, Roman spas at Bath, wild ponies in Dartmoor and a rugged shoreline with sandy beaches. Best town to be near: centrally located Salisbury, a medieval cathedral city.

## Denmark

"Denmark may seem a bit obscure," says Imboden, "but many rentals are available, used primarily by Danish tourists, that remind me of cottages you might find in the north woods of Minnesota. Very rustic. Very nice. Many interesting little towns. For the kids,

there's Legoland [in Billund] and many amusement parks. Plus the beach, although the North Sea can get cold in the off season." Best town to be near: Ringkøbing, halfway up the coast and a few miles inland from a string of beach and dune resorts.

## **Rental Companies**

Many companies offer European properties for rent, including:

- Agriturismo (011-39-0575-616091, [www.agriturismo.com](http://www.agriturismo.com)), based in Italy, has hundreds of rural properties throughout Italy. Specializes in farm stays.
- Barclay International (800-845-6636, [www.barclayweb.com](http://www.barclayweb.com)), based in New York and London, offers high-end villas in France, Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, England, Ireland. Also offers apartments in London, Paris and Rome. Very little below \$1,000 a week.
- British Travel International (800-327-6097, [www.britishtravel.com](http://www.britishtravel.com)), based in Virginia, offers 2,400 country cottages throughout England. Weekly rentals start at \$410.
- Country Villas (011-44-113-239-0077, [www.countryvillas.com](http://www.countryvillas.com)), a British company, offers apartment and villa rentals in several European countries, with the largest selection in Italy and France.
- Debra Steitz Travel Group (808-395-7989, [www.dstravelgroup.com](http://www.dstravelgroup.com)) features more than 200 properties in the Tuscan and Umbrian regions of Italy. Most range from \$500 to \$1,500 a week.
- Doorways (800-261-4460, [www.villavacations.com](http://www.villavacations.com)) has villas in France, Italy and Spain. Offers discounts for early bookings on select villas and will book cooking classes, golf outings, bicycle tours, etc.
- Gites de France (011-33-149-70-7575, [www.gites-de-france.fr](http://www.gites-de-france.fr)) features a well-organized site with thousands of French gites -- clean, well-appointed cottages starting at \$250 a week. Choices also include B&B accommodations, farm stays and rural chalets.
- Holidays in Italy (631-765-3809, [www.holidaysinitaly.com](http://www.holidaysinitaly.com)) offers villas throughout Italy. Weekly rates range from \$300 to more than \$7,000.
- Interhome (800-882-6864, [www.interhome.com](http://www.interhome.com)) represents 20,000 properties throughout 15 countries in Europe. Rentals include a free cell phone if you book a property that costs \$100 or more a night. Properties available in every price range.
- Individual Travellers Company Limited (011-44-8700-771-771, [www.indiv-travellers.com](http://www.indiv-travellers.com)), a British company, represents thousands of villas, cottages, castles and farmhouses throughout Portugal, France, Italy and Spain. Many have swimming pools.

- International Chapters (011-44-20-7722-0722, [www.villa-rentals.com](http://www.villa-rentals.com)) has more than 2,000 properties, including many luxury villas, in eight countries in Europe, including Austria, France, Italy and Greece.
- Italian Vacation Villas (202-333-6247, [www.villasitalia.com](http://www.villasitalia.com)), a local company, has 400-plus properties throughout Italy, ranging from modest apartments to seaside villas. The couple-owned firm will also arrange personalized tours.
- Rentvillas.com (800-726-6702, [www.rentvillas.com](http://www.rentvillas.com)), based in California, represents properties in Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Greece and Great Britain. Web site is well-organized and easy to use.
- Vacanca ([www.vacanca.com](http://www.vacanca.com)), a Swiss Internet company, manages more than 1,000 rental homes in 31 countries, including Austria, Britain, Czech Republic and Germany. Prices start at \$334 a week for a place in the Dordogne.
- VillaNet (800-964-1891, [www.rentavilla.com](http://www.rentavilla.com)), a Seattle firm, offers villas in France, Italy, Portugal and Great Britain, including several top-end properties. Web specials offer up to 10 percent discounts on select properties.
- Ville et Village (610-559-8080, [www.villeetvillage.com](http://www.villeetvillage.com)) has more than 1,300 properties in France and Italy.

-- Pamela Gerhardt and Carol Sottili

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