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The villa solution

By Lini S. Kadaba

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Every five years, Kevin and Corinne Cody celebrate their wedding anniversary by boarding an airplane to distant destinations.

When the emerald year, No. 55, arrived two years ago, the Doylestown couple dreamed up a 10-day journey to Italy, the birthplace of Corinne's grandmother. And they decided to invite the extended clan - no small enterprise.

"Our kids live all over the country," Corinne says of her brood of five. "We go to Italy to get together."

Spouses, significant others, and grandchildren swelled the traveling party to 24, ages 5 to 77. Accommodations were the tricky part - what hotel or resort could fit them on one floor?

A villa (or two) proved ideal - an increasingly popular option among families headed to Europe.

"We wanted this feeling of togetherness as a family," Corinne explains.

At the Buonvisi Estate, in the Tuscan hills of Lucca, the family always gathered for dinner in the large dining hall of the Villa Del Barbaro, one of two villas and an apartment that they rented for the week for \$18,000. Families took turns cooking or hiring a chef.

"It makes a home," says Ellen Sinoff, an agent at Doorways Ltd. in Bryn Mawr, which specializes in villa vacations to Italy. "The kids can walk into the kitchen and get a bowl of cereal. You get so much more privacy, space, and convenience."

Villas can be impressive retreats, with a dozen ornate bedrooms (and as many or more marble bathrooms), home theaters, antique furnishings, and cooks for a price of \$2,000 per person per week - cheaper than luxury hotels. More modest homes rent for as little as \$500 per person per week.

Joseph and Gianna Dini, owners of the 344-acre property, welcomed the Cody clan with a lovely Italian meal of pasta, chicken, vegetables, and lots of wine, providing a touch of Old World charm.

"The history you were surrounded by was amazing," says daughter-in-law Judy Cody of Doylestown. The estate has remnants of a tower that dates to the 13th century, and it once housed a Roman Catholic cardinal. Lucca, known for its medieval double walls, is just 21/2 miles away.

After a day of exploring places such as Florence, Cinque Terre, Pisa, and Vinci (inventor Leonardo's home), the three generations gathered in the three-story white stucco Villa Del Barbaro, a five-bedroom, five-bathroom manse with two living rooms and two kitchens that dates to the 1700s. They would swap stories over pasta, bread and olive oil, and, of course, wine.

The younger families stayed at Villa Cardinale, a century older and set atop a steep hill. Their reward was a stunning view of the estate's vineyards, olive trees, and woods. An apartment in a carriage house housed the rest of the party.

The villas, with red-tile roofs and stucco facades, have a rustic feel that carries over to the rooms, painted in shades of rich rust and yellow, with wood-beam ceilings, terra-cotta floors, and exposed stone walls. Many of the traditional furnishings are Dini family antiques. And each villa has at least one Jacuzzi.

Romance was in the air. Two older grandsons came with girlfriends and left with fiancées.

One of the highlights was pizza night. Villa Del Barbaro has a traditional brick pizza oven, and for \$500 a *pizzaiole*, or professional pizza maker, from Naples brought a huge bag of dough and hats and aprons for all. The younger grandchildren preferred to play while the rest of the family rolled out dough, spread sauce, sprinkled cheese, and added fresh basil to make margherita pizzas.

"It was better than Pizza Hut or Domino's," Logan Cody, 12 now, says of the homecooked meal made far from home. "Villas are fun."

Rent a Villa

For information about villa rentals in Italy, France, and Spain, check with Doorways Ltd., 900 County Line Rd., Bryn Mawr, at 610-520-0806 or www.villavacations.com.

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