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ARTS & TRAVEL The Post and Courier



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# See Italy more like a native than a tourist by renting a home

BY CARRIE ALEXANDER  
The Orlando Sentinel

Sipping morning coffee on a stone terrace. Savoring sweet watermelon on a sun-washed afternoon. Meandering through tiny medieval villages.

These moments embody what author Frances Mayes calls "the voluptuousness of Italian life" in "Under the Tuscan Sun," a compelling tale of an American couple who bought and renovated an old stone villa in Tuscany. Mayes' lyrical descriptions of the idyllic Italian landscape in the 1996 bestseller inspired many Americans to travel to the region to feast on Tuscan life, if only for a few days.

Travel industry professionals are gearing up for what they believe may be another wave of dreamy-eyed Italy-bound sightseers, this time inspired by the film of the same name adapted from Mayes' book.

Keris Dalkiewicz of Leisure Resource, a vacation rental company in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.,

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says Tuscany has long been a hot area for vacation rentals, and the film "will certainly revive it again."

Mayes shelled out her life savings for the chance to live like an Italian. Vacationers too can go beyond the typical tourist experience and become immersed in local culture. They can carve out a fulfilling stay by bypassing hotels and staying in an early 17th-century country villa in the Tuscan countryside, a private apartment near the Colosseum in Rome, or one of the many other such choices available throughout Italy.

Marilyn Grimm of Orlando wanted such a setting when she planned a family vacation several years ago.

"We had been to Italy before and done the tourist things," Grimm says. "We wanted to eat in little country restaurants. We wanted to experience little tiny towns that most people don't see."

Her family of six rented a four-bedroom fieldstone farmhouse perched on the side of a hill near Monticiano. The comfortably furnished house had beamed ceilings, a fireplace and a balcony overlooking the countryside.

"It wasn't anything fancy at all," she says. "The beds were good, bathrooms all new, and there was plenty of hot water."

Although the property was near town, the setting was isolated. The Grimms saved money by preparing breakfast in the kitchen.

"It's very different from staying in big cities and hotels and that kind of thing," Grimm, 59, says.

During the stay, the family rented a van with which to tour enchanting hill towns that she described as looking like "cupcakes with icing on top." Grimm and her family shopped for cheese and salami in local markets and supped alfresco at cozy cafes.

"We went to a different vineyard every day," Grimm says. "We had picnics in the vineyards, and nobody minded. They had scenic spots with

picnic tables."

Alice Tetelman, of Italian Vacation Villas in Washington, D.C., says home rentals suit "people who are looking for a different kind of experience, and who might enjoy cooking ... people who want to take the time to see another part of Italy. You have to go to the shops and buy the stuff. It's not a difficult thing to do, but you need to be a little bit adventurous. It affords you more space, a place that's yours."

Planning ahead, experts say, is the key to a vacation that allows you to experience la dolce vita, the sweet life.

Rentals are available through brokers, who represent a variety of properties, or through individual owners. Travelers sometimes can save money by leasing directly from owners, but if problems arise during the stay, such renters are without a safety net that a broker or travel agent can provide. Also, renters may feel more comfortable knowing that reputable brokers visit properties throughout the year to make sure they are up to standards. Travelers can search for brokers on the Web or by calling local travel agents.

"The first thing you'd need to do is call somebody like me, because I have information and houses to rent," says Tetelman, whose company represents more than 450 Italian properties -- from apartments in the city to farmhouses scattered throughout the countryside, a sun-drenched canvas where nature is painted in brilliant golds, greens and terra cottas, with picturesque stone houses set amidst olive groves and vineyards.

Tuscany is a favorite spot, but most rental companies offer properties throughout Italy as well as other countries.

"I'd get a map and some guidebooks to start thinking about areas that I wanted to travel," says Tetelman, who, with her husband, Martin Wenick, lived for several years in Italy. They still travel to the country several times a year.

"Think about the kind of vacation that you are looking for," she says, adding that you should tell the brokers what you're expecting from your trip and allow them to make suggestions.

Keep in mind that renting a property won't afford the pampering of a hotel stay, experts say. You'll have to make your own bed, brew your espresso and call for dinner reservations -- or pay extra for staff, when available. But it is an opportunity to experience Italy more like a resident than a tourist.

Consider the dates you want to travel, the number of people in your group, the type of property you want to rent, and your price range, Tetelman suggests.

Do you want to be in a secluded spot in the country, within walking distance of a town, or near the seacoast? Are views important? Do you want something rustic or more formal?

Dalkiewicz of Leisure Resource says rural rentals are best saved for the seasoned traveler.

For first-time travelers, it can be a little daunting, she says, trying to decide what they will require in accommodations and then arranging transportation back and forth.

"A sophisticated world traveler would know what they want," she says.

Properties usually rent for a week, from Saturday to Saturday, and adding an extra day or two isn't possible, Tetelman says, so plan accordingly.

Also, consider what time of year you plan to vacation. Not all properties are available all year.

"Italy really does have four seasons," she says. "A lot of people don't realize that."

Summer is high season and will be most expensive, Tetelman says. For example, a villa that rents for \$1,975 in low season, generally November through April, excluding holidays, may go up as much as \$3,870 in high season, which is usually July and August. If the home has air conditioning -- most don't -- the rental will cost

extra. Fall and spring are less crowded and less costly. Many properties are closed in winter, but those that are available generally can be bargains. But if you rent in cooler seasons, heating and firewood are additional charges.

Also, holidays such as Easter and Christmas often book quickly.

Fall is a wonderful time to vacation in the region surrounding Cortona, the setting of Mayes' book and film, says Kit Burns of Doorways in Bryn Mawr, Pa., who brokers European vacation homes.

"The wine harvest starts in October, as does the nearby Perugia chocolate festival, which brings chocolate manufacturers from across Europe," she says. "November features the olive harvest and, of course, the olive oil tasting festival."

Also important to consider is which amenities you'd like to have. Some rentals include a VCR, telephones and swimming pools. Other properties may not have such amenities or may charge extra for them.

Tetelman says European appliances are sometimes a disappointment for Americans.

"There are no clothes dryers in Italy," she says. "In Italy, the sun dries your clothes. So that's one thing you might think you're getting but you won't. Washing machines work differently. It takes longer to run because the water heats up in the machine. Electricity is very expensive. Also, some places will have a TV but no satellite, so all programming will be in Italian."

To keep homes cool without air conditioning, Italians open windows in the morning and evening to capture cooling breezes and shutter them against the heat of midday, Tetelman says. And open windows -- usually without screens -- can mean renters will be sharing the home with annoying flying insects, she says.

Another important consideration is transportation. Travelers who stay outside town will need to make arrangements to get to the property and for

any sightseeing excursions during the stay.

"We believe that renting a car is absolutely essential in order to enjoy the countryside," Tetelman says. "You want to get to other places - - either to restaurants or other places to explore."

Communicating with non-English speaking rural residents can be a challenge, but it doesn't have to hamper your enjoyment. Point and gesture if you must, says Grimm, who enjoyed her farmhouse stay in Tuscany.

"Even in off-the-beaten-track places, they seem to be able to deal with Americans," she says. "You can certainly try on a blouse or order a meal."

Once you've selected a property, scrutinize the rental agreement to make sure you understand fully the costs, cancellation penalties and any conditions that apply. Rentals usually are furnished and stocked with cookware, towels and bed linens, but it's always a good idea to ask for particulars.

Be specific with your questions, Dalkiewicz advises. When couples rent space for two in a villa, it could mean they are getting a separate apartment or that they will share the villa with several couples they don't know.

Like hotels, costs vary widely, depending on the size and location of the property. For example, a villa near Siena listed with Doorways is \$9,250 per week in the summer high season for a stay of up to 14 people or \$11,250 for up to 18 people. In the low winter season, the prices drop to \$8,500 and \$10,500. For this, you'll have window screens, a dishwasher, clothes dryer, fax, phone and satellite TV.

A Venice apartment that sleeps two, listed with Italian Vacation Villas, is \$1,025 in low season and \$1,125 in high season. The apartment has a TV and phone; utilities are extra.

Expect to pay a nonrefundable deposit of between 30 percent and 75 percent of the rental fee to reserve your property. Consider trip

cancellation insurance if you're worried about unforeseen events disrupting your plans.

Most brokers don't arrange flights but will help with ground transportation and offer suggestions for dining and shopping.

Grimm says her Tuscan farmhouse vacation was quiet and relaxing, and she wouldn't hesitate to do it again.

"We all had a wonderful time," she says. "I would rate it as one of my favorite vacations in Europe."

### **IF YOU GO:**

Vacationers can book European rentals through travel agents or company Web sites. Here are a few to try:

-- Leisure Resource, Palm Beach Gardens, offers rentals through Go Travel in Orlando; (407) 423-5300; [contus.com](http://contus.com).

-- TraveLink Services and Odyssey Travel, Orlando, offers a variety of properties throughout Europe; (407) 896-8587; [infotravelink.webmail.com](mailto:infotravelink.webmail.com).

-- Italian Vacation Villas, Washington, D.C., rents villas, farmhouses and apartments in Italy; (202) 333-6247; [villasitalia.com](http://villasitalia.com).

-- Domani of Sammamish, Washington, has a variety of properties for rent throughout Italy, and also arranges hotel reservations; (877) 436-6264; [domani-usa.com](http://domani-usa.com).

-- Doorways, Bryn Mawr, Pa., rents villas in Italy and other countries in Europe; (610) 520-0806; [villavacations.com](http://villavacations.com).