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Countryside VacationsSM Newsletter

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The insider's guide to renting Europe's cottages, castles, and villas

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Countryside Vacations

is a newsletter that describes everything you need to know about a unique style of travel called "self-catered" vacations. Each issue is packed with information, including:

- Reviews of rental agencies
- Reviews of rental properties in Europe, plus contact information
- Reviews of restaurants and shops in the European countryside
- Stories from travelers about their own experiences in Europe's lesser-traveled back roads and villages, places often left out of the guide books
- Tips on how to make the most of your self-catered vacation—what to look for in a rental property, what to ask before you book a property, what to bring with you.

Subscribe today, and join the savvy travelers who share your desire to explore the untouristed byways of Europe at a leisureed pace. We look forward to sharing our experiences with you.

RENTAL COMPANY REVIEW

Doorways Number One

Emphasizing friendly people, both at home and abroad, helps this company provide a great overall vacation experience.

Doorways is a top-notch company that offers excellent, cherry-picked properties with an emphasis on Italy and, to a lesser degree, France and Spain. Realizing that vacationers particularly enjoy meeting natives on their trips, Doorways astutely seeks out not just beautiful properties but warm and accommodating owners and other service providers, who receive raves from clients. The company's web site is beautiful, thorough, easy to navigate, and a treasure trove of helpful information. It is occasionally a bit slack in its attention to detail, but this is a minor quibble easily remedied, and it's the only fault we can find with Doorways, which is in all other respects a great resource with wonderful offerings.

Founder Kit Burns says the company offers about 500 properties, the bulk of which are in Italy, France, or Spain. "I particularly love Italy, which is about 80 percent of our business," she says. In that country, Florence and Tuscany are very well represented,

with an emphasis on the Chianti area. Rome, the Amalfi Coast, and Sicily each offer between 13 and 16 properties. There are between 5 and 10 properties each in the city of Venice, Veneto, the Lake District, Lazio, Umbria, and the Italian Riviera, and just 2 each in Le Marche and Emilia-Romagna. In France, there are 23 properties in Provence, 9 each in Paris and the Riviera, and 1 or 2 in Brittany, Normandy, Languedoc-Rousillon, and Dordogne. In Spain, Doorways offers a good selection in Barcelona/Catalonia as well as the Costa del

Sol, and 3 or fewer in Madrid, Costa Blanca, the Pyrenées, and Seville.

Beyond these main countries, there are a couple properties each in Greece and on Tortola in the British Virgin Islands, and an apartment in London. The reason for the smattering of miscellaneous countries, Burns says, is that owners of properties in one of their core countries may also own another property that Doorways has also taken on.

The menu of properties that the company has assembled has come through a lot of "knocking on doors," Burns laughs. When she first opened Doorways, she personally sought out every property she represented. Today, however, "I get offered five to ten villas a day," she says. "I'm buried, because we're honest and we have nice customers, so property owners like to work with us. They tell their aunts and their cousins about us. We have a very high category of owners—a lot of marquesses and contessas—and they all know each other.

Casa Diana, Catalonia

They say, 'If Count So-and-so's property is on your list, we'll do it, too.'"

As her options have increased, Burns says, the quality of property that she is able to offer has also risen. "We've screened out the more basic properties that we had in the beginning," she says, adding that she can vouch for the superiority of Doorways' selection because either she or someone on her staff has personally visited every one, and revisits them all annually. "Before you know how good a place is, you have to smell it and listen to the yard," she says. "We're selling a dream. People are going there because they want a really magical place. They don't want to look out and see a factory or a power line. They don't want the neighbor's TV blaring. They're going over there for a complete change of pace."

Through questionnaires sent out to every returning client, Burns also keeps track of how well the property owners are treating her customers. "I think we have just fabulous owners," she says. "Wonderful owners make for a wonderful rental. Our clients love their experiences meeting the

owners. We weed out any rentals where the owners are not being wonderful."

Of course, no matter how magnificent the property or how kind the owner, Burns points out, "the same villa isn't the right one for every-

one." So Doorways is dedicated to providing clients with complete information about a property, including floor plans, measurements, photos, and a list of all extra costs. "We're pretty specific in our descriptions," Burns says. "We like people to get there and find no hidden surprises."

In addition, she trains her staff—eight people including Burns herself, most of whom are Europeans—to listen to the client to understand what they want, paying special attention to issues like allergies, toddlers at properties with pools, and stairs without handrails for less agile renters. "The key to a happy customer is the right match, and that happens only when you convey as much information as

possible," Burns says.

This information includes an abundance of travel advice and information about the area where the customer is headed, some of it tucked away on a private web page available only to people who book a

bicycle tours, and even wedding planners. Again noting that she deliberately seeks out highly personable individuals to offer these services, Burns says, "We emphasize the actual experience of meeting native people." In addition,

Doorways makes sure its clients are armed to the teeth with essential information. "We're almost like a tourist office," laughs founder Kit Burns. "We make sure our customers are prepared."

rental from Doorways. "What to Expect when you Rent a Villa in Europe," a four-paged brochure that covers everything from towels to driving to window screens, is also a good general preparatory read. More specific and very in-depth in detail are the "Practical Tips for Living in Italy" and its France and Spain versions. And going one more level deeper are the "Welcome to" guides for numerous regions including Provence and Tuscany, which outline festivals, markets, food, tourist attractions, and pretty much anything else a traveler would need to know. Add to this packing lists, restaurant recommendations, and kids' guides, and their clients are armed to the teeth with essential information.

"We're almost like a tourist office," Burns laughs. "We make sure our customers are prepared." Because this information is posted on the Internet, it is up to clients to seek it out and print what they want to take with them.

Beyond rentals, Doorways will help with basic travel-agent stuff: plane, rail, car, and hotel reservations, trip insurance, and cell phone rentals. Then there are also special services such as tour guides, cooking or painting classes,

for people who live near Doorways' headquarters in Bryn Mawr, Penn., the company offers language classes.

Burns admits that clients pay for what they get, noting that most rentals run more than \$500 per person per week. "We're not the cheapest company, but I would hope the all-around experience would be the best. That's what we're aiming for," Burns says, adding, "We do have some modest places where the owners are so wonderful that we have kept them over the years. The property may be on the low end, but the whole experience the customer gets when they're staying there is not. Maybe the villa doesn't have a pool, but the clients have a wonderful experience."

Overall, the Doorways web site—the only way to access its menu of properties—is beautiful, easy to navigate, and stuffed with great information, even in the public areas open to all comers. A page of links to other helpful travel sites is long and thorough. The "Doorways History" page offers an honest and well-written introduction to self-catered vacations, and we like the "Meet the Staff" page, which is a thoughtful way to help put a face to the friendly voice on the phone. The



Villa Degas, Provence

“Special Interest” page is something few rental companies provide: lists of properties with particular attributes, such as views; accessibility to golf, tennis, or the beach; or suitability for children.

Unfortunately, the finer details of the site aren’t what they should be. To name some of the problems we encountered: Prices on many property listings cover only 2001 or 2002. The items for sale on the Doorways travel store take you to Amazon.com—not that there’s anything wrong with that, but of the travel accessories (translators, pillows, cameras), most are no longer available, and you can’t get some of the books, either. Mexico is listed at the bottom of the home page as a represented country, but darned if we could find a listing, and properties in the other three miscellaneous countries are also a bit elusive, as each link is in a different spot on the home page. A fine-tuning of their web site would bring Doorways’ score up half a point.

But all things considered, we strongly recommend Doorways as a company focused on the right things: a customer’s overall experience, high-quality properties, top-notch service, and providing thorough information. “We don’t want to just make the sale,” Burns declares. “We want a very happy customer who’s going to come back year after year and refer us to their friends. Any property can look beautiful in photos. The difference is in the high level of service and in the quality and depth of the information we offer to go along with the villa.” It’s a formula that is almost guaranteed to succeed.

DOORWAYS

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Countries: Italy, France, Spain, Greece, British Virgin Islands, England

Concentrations: Tuscany, Provence, Rome, Amalfi Coast, Sicily

Pricing: Most high-range (\$500+ per person per week)

Additional offerings: Plane, rail, car, and hotel reservations; special services such as tours and classes; homes for sale

Catalog: Online only

Credit cards: Visa and MasterCard

CV RATING: ● ● ● ● ○

REVIEWS

Using Doorways was a little bit of a leap of faith for me because I’ve done a lot of traveling but always made my own arrangements. I called all their references and spent quite a bit of time talking with them, and I got the sense that this might be a good thing to do. I worked with Kit to arrange our trip to Rome and Florence, and she was delightful—full of creative ideas, and she made some really fine suggestions. I thought that she was very responsive, and I liked the care she took, her thoughtfulness, and her follow-up; once I got to Rome she called and asked me how everything was.

The trickiest part was getting in touch with the person I was supposed to meet at the apartment, but everything went just as Kit said it would. She gave very specific instructions about how to get to and into the apartment, and that was very accurate. I had asked for apartments on the river in both cities, and I was skeptical, but they really were right there on

the river. And the apartments were spectacular—spacious and well laid out. The owners were reliable, responsive, and helpful. I could call them during the week and they would get right back to me. Kit also put me in touch with an extremely competent guide in Rome. Everything she told me was absolutely accurate.

I had a lot of loose ends that needed to be followed up on, and she was completely reliable. Sometimes when I called, if she wasn’t there I wasn’t sure that she got the message; e-mail seemed to be the best way to contact her. But I liked the sense that she would be there if I needed anything. She immediately sent me back my security deposit; I didn’t have to ask for it. There were no screw-ups. I tend to be a perfectionist about things, and this went beyond my expectations in terms of how Kit lived up to her commitments.

**DR. RUTH MORELLI
CHADDS FORD, PENN.**

They were very accommodating. They recommended a great air-conditioned apartment in Rome for our first week and found us a wonderful tour guide. They arranged all the transportation from the airport to the apartment for us and our family. At any time, if we had any problems, we could call them. We never had to!

I highly recommend them. They listened to our needs and recommended great places to fit those needs. The whole experience went beyond our expectations. I was very pleased with their service.

**BERENICE ANNECHINI
WAYNE, PENN.**

We got a terrific packet of information before we left—with maps, directions, phone numbers, names and addresses of recommended restaurants nearby, a couple of great places to shop, and a number of “must-sees” in the area. The materials gave our visit a personal flavor because

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these were favorite shops and restaurants of Doorways staff members and other Doorways customers.

The web site is really thorough, with pictures of the various villas and apartments and all sorts of helpful links. And the apartment, furnishings, and surroundings were just what we were led to expect. But the villa owners were really the best part of the experience, people who really wanted us to enjoy the time we spent in their cities. The owner of our apartment in Rome walked us all over the neighborhood and brought us to the restaurant downstairs for dinner, so we met the chef/owner who, it turns out, runs one of the hottest new restaurants in Rome, and we talked with him about wine and Roman cuisine. We almost felt like we were neighborhood residents rather than tourists.

**JOAN RYAN
HAVERFORD, PENN.**



Doorways has connected me five times into communities and houses that we have really enjoyed. They are good about describing the houses and the surroundings as well. One year the house we were renting had some construction going on in the immediate neighborhood, and they told us about it and offered us alternatives.

They sent materials about the region and maps, and they have a really good four-pager about going to Spain—tipping, how to use the phone, the kind of things that you’re glad to be reminded of, even if you went last year. They’ve been just wonderful. I feel like they care about me.

**ARDATH CADE
SEVERNA PARK, MD.**