



Main Line Life photo — PETE BANNAN

Doorways Ltd. owner Kit Burns talks with Italian teachers Martina Madella and Emanuela Villa.

Doorway to Continent opens in Bryn Mawr

By Jim McCaffrey

Kit Burns is smart.

It's not her master's in biochemistry from the University of Pennsylvania that proves it.

It's knowing that she quit that career for something much better that proves her acumen.

Now, instead of spending all day in a potentially hazardous laboratory, she makes five trips a year to Italy, France, Spain, Greece and occasionally the Caribbean to explore villas, taste wines and cheeses and generally and literally get the lay of the land.

Nine years ago, Burns created Doorways Ltd. to arrange group vacations in picturesque European apartments and villas. The properties are located in some of the most exciting cosmopolitan cities and beautiful rural landscapes in the world.

"We're matchmakers," she says, explaining the concept of Doorways Ltd. "We try to listen to people and find out what they want. If they want a luxurious apartment in a beautiful city, we have it, or if they want the experience of a simple, authentic farmhouse, we have that, too."

Burns says 80 percent of her 500 places for rent are in Italy, 10 percent are in France and the rest are in Spain and Greece, "with one spectacular place in the Caribbean."

The business operates out of an office on the Radnor side of County Line Road in a house just north of the emergency entrance to Bryn Mawr Hospital.

Don't look for Burns there. She's often away.

"We visit each of our villas," she said, explaining how she differentiates her business from others that broker European vacation homes.

"We know each of them personally. A lot of companies sell out of catalogues and they don't know the places personally. Our staff sees as many as they possibly can. I've seen all of them."

The reason is that one family's great villa may not work with another that seeks a Gallic farmhouse.

"We want them to find the perfect place because we want them to be happy and come back to us again," Burns said. "We often know the owners personally. We try to know what our guests want and get it for them."

She wants customers to tell her she arranged the best vacation of their lives for them.

"We're not the cheapest company in the business," Burns said candidly. "We're not the bargain basement of villas. We are much more custom. We get a lot of teachers and friends who want to vacation together. We have properties that can make a vacation

very special."

Some of the most popular destinations are cooking vacations in Italy and France. Burns can arrange a week of cooking lessons in Tuscany or instructions from the best chefs in Provence.

Burns recently hit on the idea of bringing interns over from Italy to offer a month of Italian lessons before taking a vacation there. This isn't meant to be conversational Italian. Rather, it's an opportunity to learn some basic linguistic survival tools.

"We have beautiful apartments in Rome, Venice or Florence," Burns promised. "Many of our clients want to go and see the great museums and culture in Italy. This is the kind of thing that will help them do that."

Group prices for the apartments and villas can run as low as \$38 per day to as high as \$190 per day.

Burns doesn't book flights but can arrange transportation and other needs once the client is at the destination. A part of her Web site entered by password directs customers to local sights, entertainments, restaurants and other local places of interest.

"My favorite place depends on who I'm going with," Burns said. "Once three or four generations of my family went on vacation together. We chose a farmhouse in the Chianti region of

Italy. The rates were reasonable. They made their own Chianti Classico wine right on the estate.

"We chose the place because it was so authentic. The vineyards were beautiful, and the house was located halfway between Sienna and Florence."

When she traveled with friends, she stayed on an Italian sheep farm where the cheese tastings were extraordinary, set in a beautiful ancient farmhouse courtyard with lovely country vistas.

"If you are traveling with little children, I would choose a villa in Lucca because it is near the beach," she added. "You can rent a villa in Italy cheaper than you can rent a home at the Jersey Shore."

Burns recommends traveling, if possible, in the spring and fall, though she admits to loving the Venice carnival in February and the olive and truffle harvests in early November.

"The latest thing is olive oil tasting," she notes, adding that she tends to bring home more olive oil than wines from her travels.

Villas generally need to be booked nine months to a year in advance.

Look at the vacation homes on the Doorways Ltd. Web site at www.villavacations.com or call for more information at 610-520-0806.

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