

It Takes a Villa

An Authentic Tuscan Experience



By Barbara Barton Sloane

Haven't we all, at one time or another, dreamed of staying in an Italian villa? Midway through our dream, however, reality sets in and the actual prospect of finding the perfect villa, arranging a stay, all seems daunting. Where to start? A good starting place is by contacting Doorways Villa Vacations, based in Bryn Mawr PA. Kit Burns, the president of Doorways, is intimately acquainted with Italy and represents many of its villas, estates and homes. She and her staff match their clients to the

property. They will work with you to choose the perfect location, the residence, and, if you wish, even create an itinerary personalized for your particular needs.

I recently had the chance to experience one of Kit's Italian villas on the Buonvisi Estate near Lucca. The Buonvisi villa dates from 1505, and the owners, Joe and Gianna Dini, are gracious hosts who invite their guests to dinner where one samples foods typical of the region.

Driving up to Villa Buonvisi,

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high atop a Tuscan hillside, we wind through olive groves bursting with fragrant spring blossoms and vineyards just beginning to mature, gearing up for their September harvest. Finally, we reach our destination. Set back from great manicured lawns, the walk-way is lined with gigantic terra cotta planters, and before us lies Villa Buonvisi. It does not disappoint. In fact, it's even more splendid than in the photos we'd seen. Fully restored to its original façade (as dictated by the Italian government), the villa is a lovely pink beige color, bearing a "Juliet" balcony and a fresco over the 16th Century doorway that the Dinis discovered when the façade was being restored.

Joe Dini, charming and affable, welcomed us with a glass of his fruity Chardonnay as we sat around the pool, trying to take in the vista, the gardens, the long grape arbor, and the mountains behind us. After a tour of the villa, we settled into our room. High, high ceilings, original, ancient tile floors, and a picture-perfect view - myriad church steeples, chestnut, olive and orange groves, iconic Tuscan cypress trees dotting the hills, and the town below, all under a Tuscan blue sky. Someone pinch me, quick!

The wonderful thing here is, whether you want to do nothing but chill out at the Villa or get active and explore the area, it's your choice. Either way, it's pretty darn wonderful. If you feel adventurous, try hiking the mountain behind the Villa. However, a word of caution: this hike is for the seriously hearty!

One climbs through some really rough terrain, winding through fields of pink, yellow, white and scarlet wild flowers and dense vegetation. Guaranteed, you're going to get a few scratches, and at some point, you'll ask yourself: "Why did I start this?" But it's too

late to turn back, so you forge on. After almost two hours, you arrive tired but awfully proud of yourself as you turn, look down, and see what you've accomplished. You've just climbed a mountain! Oh, and there's a delicious reward at the end of your climb. Perched on the top of the mountain, a cozy country restaurant, Quatri Venti, where the owner herself serves you at a long communal table set under a grove of chestnut trees. Try the hearty Ribolita, a typical, thick Tuscan soup with vegetables, beans and bread and drizzled with olive oil - a delicious and unique primi piatti and a nice, midday reward for your morning's efforts.

One day, plan to visit Lucca. In this small yet cosmopolitan walled Tuscan town, you'll find wonderful trattorias, upscale clothing and jewelry boutiques, and music. Lots of music. Let's not forget that this is the birthplace of Giacomo Puccini. The town offers hosts of concerts and operas, and in July, the famous Puccini festival takes pace in nearby Torre del Lago. About an hour from the villa, the Ligurian coastal jewels of Cinque Terre, five unique fishing villages, is known as Italy's "flower-Rivera". As you walk between the villages, you'll have breathtaking views of the emerald blue Mediterranean Sea, vineyards, lemon trees and pine forests. Sit at an outdoor cafe overlooking the sea, and participate in one of my favorite pastimes: people-watching. A fun way to spend an afternoon.

And for museums and shopping (including many designer outlets), you'll want to spend a day in Florence, only an hour away.

During your stay, check out the nearby ancient town of Pietrasanta, founded in 1255. One evening, we visited this pretty village and at twilight sat at a sidewalk café in the town square. Soon, we were joined

for an appetif by the town's mayor, Massimo Mallegni, a youngish, elegant man, who was delighted to explain Pietrasanta's illustrious history. As light faded, before us lay the 14th Century Church of Sant'Agostino, in the background the Apuan Alps, and flanked on every sides, the famed marble quarries where Michaelangelo himself chose the perfect piece of marble to create "The Pieta" and "David."

Speaking of marble, in this region known as Versilia, visit the town of Carrara and you can arrange for a walking tour of Michaelangelo's quarry and then visit the many sculpture studios in the area. Here also you'll find Parco delle Alpi Apuane and Corchia's Cavern, the most imposing underground cave in Italy, and one of the biggest in the world. Its amazing interior of stalagmites and stalagnites is bathed in artistic lighting and will leave you breathless.

Feeling a bit tired? Visit the Bagni di Pisa Spa, near Lucca in San Giuliano Terme, where you can luxuriate with their Silk Thermal Face Treatment or their Seaweed Body Wrap. Or simply walk from the villa to the bottom of the hill and refresh yourself with one of the many pastel colored gelati at the café La Perla. Finally, swim or laze by the Villa's pool while Rufus, the resident German Shepard drops a tattered ball at your feet and with soulful eyes, asks you to play "fetch". Be forewarned: once you throw that ball, he'll drop it at your feet again, and again and again...

Now, the event you've been waiting for all day: Dinner! Visit a local restaurant and linger over a traditional Tuscan meal. Among the restaurants we tried: All'Olivo in Lucca, L'Antonio in Pietrasanta and Bimbotto in Vorno. And don't rush this experience. Dinners in

Italy are long, food is discussed, tasted, appreciated, and the wine flows. A perfect end to a perfect day.

As our departure from Villa Buonvisi draws near, I think back over the week – the warm hospitality of the Dini's, the unique and special experiences each day brought, the tranquility of soft Tuscan evenings, playing "fetch" with Rufus, and the sheer delight of living like a Tuscan!

Sorry Marriott and Hyatt, you just can't compare. Memories are made of this, and yes, it takes a Villa!

Good News for 2008

Joe & Gianna Dini have decided that, in addition to the two villas they presently rent on the estate,

the Villa del Barbaro and the Villa Cardinale, they will rent, in 2008 for the first time, their home, the Villa Buonvisi. With air conditioning, large living spaces and ten bedrooms with ensuite bathrooms, this villa even comes with the use of their private beach cabana! Some of the Villa's amenities are a billiard table, bocce court, home theatre and gym. Also, it is fully staffed with a cook, gardener and housekeeper. If you're planning a vacation with family or several friends, look no further. Kit Burns of [Doorways, Ltd.](#), calls this experience a "golden dream". In her capable hands, your Tuscan dream is about to come true!

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Corchia's Cave – Tel: 39 0584 778405 <http://www.antrocorchia.it>

Bagni di Pisa Spa – Largo P. Shelley, 18, San Giudiano Terme www.bagnidipisa.com

Ristorante All'Olivo – Piazza S.Quirico, 1 - Tel: 0583 496264

L'Antonio – Piazzetta Crispi 11-12 - Tel: 0584 793384

Bimbotti – Via di Vorno, 177 – Tel: 0583 9711930