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# Discovering the Italy that group tours ignore

By Ralph Collier

Fade in: an exterior grassy knoll long shot of green Tuscany. It is like a scene out of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Across a crowded lawn, I see a stranger. And somehow, I know I want to see this stranger again. It is not an enchanted evening - it is moment ogling a noble 500-year-old Italian villa. Even for those who see a lot of the countryside at home and abroad, such enchanted moments are rare. Ours came courtesy of the Buonvisi Estate near Lucca, birthplace of Puccini, with its crystal chandeliered dining room, terraced gardens, majestic rooms with modern amenities and canopied beds, sheets with high thread count and a quiet natural beauty enveloping the entire property, from which one can see the lush Tuscan countryside. The landscape is lovely, the air is pure and the area brims with history. If you imagine that renting a 500-year-old, fully air-conditioned villa is a nightmare of ancient faucets that hiss like a cobra and water heaters emitting deep intestinal burps, think twice. These are villas constantly updated to gratify well-seasoned, sophisticated and demanding world travelers and their families. The Villa Buonvisi, as one superb example, has furniture capacious enough to occupy almost an entire wall of our mammoth handsome bedroom. Looking out at the expansive lawns below allows you to hear fragmented movements of birdsong and see a leafy parkside setting complete with fruit-bearing lemon trees. There are a number of swimming pools; one is filled with salt water.

The doyenne of the Buonvisi Estate is Gianna Dina, a savvy mother of two with an impossible-to-define elegance who rules the local setting. (There two other nearby villas, as well.) Upon meeting you, she strikes a note of instant intimacy. She and her husband, Joe, speak perfect English. Joe spent many years in Canada and the U.S. and is a veteran of the U.S. Air Force. Guests enjoy the voltage of his talk.

There is a giant liquor repository in the entrance hall sitting area. To soothe a sun-beaten brow in the Tuscan summer sun, you will likely get a drink with real lemons freshly squeezed from trees at the front door. In contrast, city bars employ a "gun" that dispenses factory produced concoctions of citrus concentrates that you would no more drink than eat prefab burger mix.

Finding a historic villa produces excitement akin to that of an archaeologist at the site of a dig or a museum curator who puts a rare find on exhibition. By any measure of desirability, it is worth the effort. The Villa Buonvisi will be available for rent next year, complete with 10 bedrooms and appropriate en suite bathrooms, fully staffed with

cook, housekeeper and gardener.

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Built in 1505, the villa has been renovated numerous times. It has frescoes, a home theater and gym and is surrounded by its own vineyards and olive trees some four kilometers south of the lovely walled city of Lucca. Families enjoy the estate for its proximity to the Mediterranean beaches and a great variety of activities.

To reach this villa, you fly into Pisa, a relatively small town where you can get in and out of the airport in minutes, the way you traveled decades ago. Visiting this town is a very different experience than going to Paris or London. It can be more fun this way - you are not burdened by obligations to cross historic buildings off a master "to see" list, but may enjoy a marvelous old town of medieval stone buildings, winding alleys and ramparts.

Still want crowds? Florence is 60 minutes away by car, and its streets and sites are jammed. At the Bargello, you can glimpse the first free-standing nude by a Western artist since antiquity, Donatello's androgynous David.

Back in Lucca, instead of hordes of tourists, you meet local people who actually live in the area. There are architects, painters, sculptors, epicureans, garrulous raconteurs and more. In restaurants, waiters are kind and patient - one feels as though one had fallen into a time warp.

Finally, if you want to avoid what Robert Benchley called "museum feet," one of the occupational hazards of sightseeing, Lucca is the ideal place; it is unhurried and spectacularly self-enclosed. The town lies behind a dry moat and vast slanting ramparts of mellow brick, their tops thickly wooded and broad enough for a good road and shaded picnic area. George Orwell said that the Italians can't do anything without making a terrible noise, and the Lucchese are no exception. Scores of scooters, motorbikes, cars and pedestrians jostle one another in the narrowest of streets, and the racket ricochets from the looming buildings. But even the noise is intimate, not unlike family chatter. And the hordes of foreigners who descend on the larger cities, digital cameras at the ready, are nowhere to be seen.

For information on Villa Buonvisi and other villas, please contact Doorways Ltd. in Bryn Mawr, Pa. at 1-800-261-4460 or visit [www.villavacations.com](http://www.villavacations.com).

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