



Keys to success

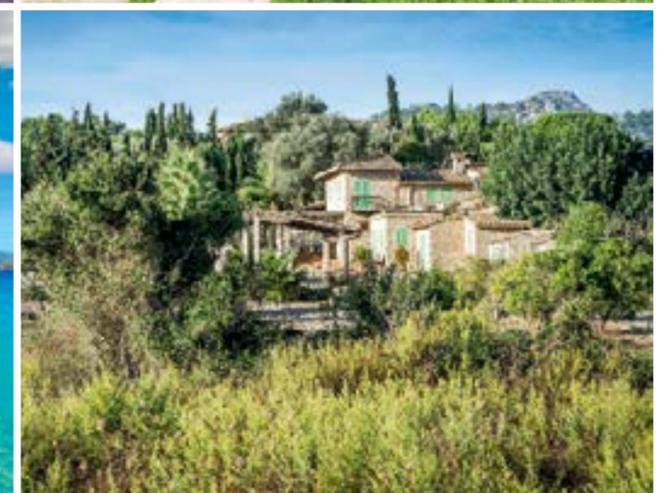
Want space? Freedom? Five-star style at three-star prices? A villa can deliver all of this, says **Katie Bowman** — just as long as you follow some simple house rules...

a word of warning: if you're inclined to put on a couple of pounds each summer holiday, you'll gain double that on a villa break. When you spot a round of plump Camembert on the kitchen sideboard, there'll be nothing to stop you sweeping a *tranche* across a hunk of baguette and eating it in seconds flat. That chilled half-drunk bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé in the fridge door — why not finish it off, if only for the recycling bin's sake? Or the pot of handmade pistachio *gelato* you bought in the village this morning — there it is in the freezer, just begging to be downed in two tablespoons on a hot August night.

When you're on a villa holiday, there is — catastrophically, but also wonderfully — no reason not to eat what you want, when you want. There are no prohibitive hotel menu prices. No room service charges. No strict restaurant opening hours. And no slow (or, worse, forgetful) service. And those are just four off-the-top-of-my-head reasons to love villas. Another? The space! On one multi-generational trip to Lanzarote, my toddler swooped on the lawn swings while the uncles played ping pong, while Granny read in the hot tub, while Granddad dozed on the daybed, while a cousin whipped up black-rice *paella* in the hi-tech kitchen, before calling all the troops to lunch on the pretty shaded terrace (one uncle got lost, as there were

TRY THE MIDDLE GROUND
If you've qualms about renting a villa for the first time, consider a hotel with villas in the grounds. You can use all the facilities (and don't have to cook), but you get extra privacy. See Scottdunn.com and click on 'Hotels with Villas'

three terraces to choose from). The villa had spaces for when we wanted to be together, and spaces for when we needed to be apart. We never had to eat dinner in the same place. Never had to whisper on the balcony because Baby was sleeping in the next room. And never had to knock on doors, trying to find each other down long hotel corridors. Am I making my point? It's not that I don't like hotels. It's just that I love villas. The freedom. The privacy. The space. The luxury! My last villa holiday was in Mallorca, where Cabanellas welcomed us, all chic green shutters and weathered stone, from the top of a wildflower-strewn track like a little boutique hotel from heaven. Except... it was all ours. White-wood four-poster beds,



terracotta pots, exposed beams and a designer pool so cool, I wanted to open a Facebook account if only to 'share' it with 'friends' straightaway. Had this been a B&B, it would have cost at least £200 a night for the teensiest room, but the entire week here cost just over £1,000 (sleeping six, that worked out at £24pp, per night). And nobody shuffled us out at 9am to clean the room. I'll level with you, there have been villa disappointments. Try as you might, there are some things you can never predict when it comes to staying in a stranger's home. While a hotel has thousands of reviews, TripAdvisor ratings and online guest photos, a villa never comes under such scrutiny. Which is how I ended up in a Spanish apartment with white-knuckle spiral staircase — even scarier since I was travelling with my crawling one-year-old. And why I damaged my Sicilian rental car every time I went out, thanks to the driveway through farmland. And had to move out of the Floridian

'beachfront' condo that overlooked four lanes of highway before any water actually appeared. So, my top tips when looking online? You *must* read the smaller details (what's the point of a pool if it's not heated in March?). You *need* to analyse the photos to work out what goes where (is that a kitchen coming off the baby's bedroom?). You *have* to ask uncomfortable questions ('Can you remove that deathtrap of a sculpture before we arrive, please?'). And be adaptable. If you're ready for a little compromise, you'll be dandy. So how did we find the near-perfection that was Villa Cabanellas in Mallorca? The first step was to approach a villa agent — Simpson Travel, on this occasion. I'm a big fan of the 'other' way, too — those vast listings sites that act merely as a house portal, putting you in touch with the owner (HomeAway, Airbnb, Holiday Lettings, etc) — and I've used them dozens of times. But this particular trip involved three generations of one family, a special

Cabanellas welcomed us, all chic green shutters and weathered stone, like a little boutique hotel from heaven. Except... it was all ours

occasion and a sketchy time of year, April. We needed expertise, not just blinding choice. After a chat over the phone listening to my paranoia and peevish, Simpson laid down the law: I wanted an EU country (in case baby gets ill), but I didn't want a small island (no decent infrastructure), nor did I want an exclusively tourist spot (some Greek islands shut down outside summer), but then again, I needed stuff to do (our party ranged in age from 3 to 68). Provence? Too chilly. Crete? Too big. Corsica? Too early. Mallorca it was — Pollença in the northwest, where the weather is often warmest, and the beaches sheltered (the fact that BBC1's >

Breakfast is served: opposite, croissants on the terrace at Villa Cabanellas, Mallorca. Above, clockwise from top left, a cafe-lined square in Pollença; the pool at Cabanellas; the villa in its scenic rural surroundings; Platja del Port de Pollença

Designer looks, a pool, great gardens, a just-right location, and a collection of fishing nets that entertained the toddler for *hours*

The Night Manager had just aired, and postcard-perfect Pollença had stolen the spotlight, even from baddie Richard Roper, did help). Then it was time to pick the house. Villa Cabanellas ticked every box, with designer looks, a pool, great gardens, a just-right location, and a fishing-net collection that turned out to keep the toddler entertained for hours. *And hours*. You can never foresee what it'll be that kids love most about a villa – it's been a shell collection, a plastic jug and a set of curtains in other homes. But this time, the fishing nets caught the imagination of my daughter – hook, line and sinker.

The trip was a success. (Our special-occasion lunch, in case you're interested, was at the cliffside fish restaurant Ca's Patro March, in Deia.) But it was a success because we did our homework, followed the golden rules, and learned from villa let-downs along the way. You? You don't need go through all *that*. No, no, no. All you need do is read this no-nonsense guide, book any one of the brilliant villas we've hand-picked, and have a good time. Guaranteed. Until, that is, you arrive back home and get on the scales.

Get me there...

Simpson Travel (020 8003 6557, simpsontravel.com) also has villas in Greece, Turkey, Corsica and France. One week at Villa Cabanellas (available April to October) starts at £410pp based on six sharing, including flights and car hire. Alternatively, the villa alone starts at £1,001 per week. If you do travel independently, fly to Palma (45 minutes' drive from Pollença) from more than 20 UK regional airports, from £59 return (compare airlines and fares at skyscanner.net). **Holidayautos.com** offers one week's car hire in Mallorca from £52.



More villas we love...

Read on as we reveal the best rental agents out there, along with our pick of the best properties on their books — every one of them gets our good-time guarantee!

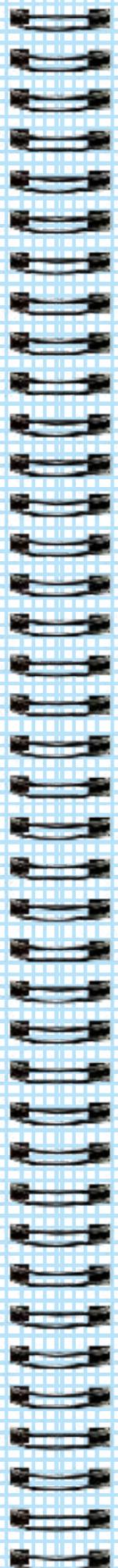
Prices in these listings are for a week, low season, unless otherwise stated.

OLIVER'S TRAVELS

USP: Affordable luxury worldwide
Because: Brainchild of best mates Oliver Bell and Ravi Sabharwal, Oliver's Travels has quirky properties that don't cost the Earth. *Châteaux* are their mainstay (the pair got into rentals after a boozy week at one in the Dordogne), but their tagline, 'Why do ordinary?', means one-off villas and beach huts abound (0800 133 7999, oliverstravels.com). **Our fave five:** On Tenerife, Villa Burbujas is a five-star, Bali-style love

Bathing beauty: above, by the pool at Villa Burbujas, Tenerife. Opposite, clockwise from top left, Château de Bois, in the Dordogne; Sibton Park's garden, in Suffolk; Ty Hedfan, Wales

shack with a three-star price tag, in the grounds of Royal Garden Villas & Spa resort (sleeps 2; from £1,824, B&B). In the Cotswolds, Ropewalk Cottage is a gold-stone cottage in the village of Blockley (sleeps 6; from £750). On Saint Lucia, Tamarind House is a breezy bargain with a pool, tennis court and views of those giant twin peaks, the Pitons (sleeps 6; from £3,475). A stone-skin from Lago d'Orta, one of the Italian Lakes, Palazzo Novara is a 17th-century villa with indoor pool and spa (sleeps 8; from £4,071). Two lakes, walled gardens and its own arboretum guarantee total privacy at hilltop



Domaine de Bellanger, in Aquitaine (sleeps 16; from £4,926).

THE MODERN HOUSE

USP: Architectural wonders
Because: Ah, the Modern House. How many lunch hours we have lost, planning fantasy holidays on your dreamy website. In fact, the company's true schtick is selling 'Britain's finest modern architecture' (it's a specialist estate agent), but it now offers holiday lets in these spectacular homes, too. Don't assume this translates solely to sharp-edged glass boxes in the back of beyond — there are soft-focus romantic cottages in Andalucía as well as bang-in-the-city apartments (020 3795 5920, themodernhouse.com). **Our fave five:** British rentals at the lower end of the price spectrum sell out fastest, Ty Hedfan in Wales being the bestseller — the big-windowed cubic property cantilevers eye-catchingly over River Ysgir (sleeps 6; from £1,050). Meanwhile, Petit Bayle in France's Lot-et-Garonne is so well-loved, one renter took it for six months (sleeps 6; from £700). The Modern House co-founder Matt Gibberd has two mid-century modern favourites in Cape Cod, southern Massachusetts, USA (each sleeping 6; from £1,600), but he

also has a soft spot for mighty Melides in Portugal, a contemporary concrete structure with angular pool (sleeps 8; from £3,200).

SIMPLY PERIGORD

USP: Mid-range Dordogne
Because: Some 25 years after exiting the City for the quiet Dordogne, owners Allan and Karen Higgins are still sourcing properties, fixing pool filters and racing between villas to ensure clients know the best bistros and *boulangeries* in their adopted home, described by Allan as '1950s England, only warmer'. Their 50 per cent repeat rate tells a tale (00 33 553 545431, simply-perigord.com). **Our fave five:** Jolie Maison is a cute stone cottage surrounded by woodland (sleeps 4; from £635). Last year, Au Bois Dormant was a cow barn with dirt floors; now it's a solid, spacious villa with sweeping views from pool and terrace (sleeps 6; from £860). Another renovation, Au Bord de la Rivière (sleeps 8; from £1,499) has gardens right down to the Dordogne river. In medieval Le Bugue — Simply Perigord's base — Maison de Ville is a handsome four-storey townhouse overlooking the Vézère river (sleeps 8; from £906). Multi-family group? Try Château des Bois, with 73 private



What I learned No.1

The intrusive owner
 'Last year, our villa owner kept dropping in on us. Daily! When I moaned to friends, I heard all sorts of similar stories — one owner even crashed a New Year's Eve party.'
The solution:
 'Placate the owner's fears, and let them know you'll look after the property as if it were your own. If that fails? Contact the booking agent and let them know, so that they can address it with the homeowners — or leave a red-alert review yourself for future guests.'
 David Chile, Exeter



hectares plus a boating and fishing lake (sleeps 20; from £6,925).

KATE & TOM'S

USP: Big UK houses
Because: Too many large-scale rental companies don't allow groups for those really 'fun' occasions — hen and stag dos, 50th birthdays — but most of Kate & Tom's properties are for exactly such events. There's something to suit every budget, too, whether you want the 'el cheapo' get-together with school friends costing £50pp for three nights, or wedding-worthy seaside country houses. Staff are friendly, and when something goes wrong (say, the pool's not open when it should be) they're quick to compensate you (01242 235151, kateandtoms.com). **Our fave five:** Polpier in Mevagissey, Cornwall, is our out-and-out favourite — it comes with a pool, herb garden, disco, ping-pong room and seaside views (sleeps 16; from £4,030). A Georgian pile in the rolling green of Suffolk, Sibton Park is proper old-school luxe and has a games room in its basement (sleeps 24; from £11,700). Homely Derwentwater House & Lodge in the Lake District has epic Cumbrian views (sleeps 16-20; from £3,750-4,300), while chic modern the White >

Villa glossary

You say tomato... Rental jargon can be misleading. Get to know these common terms and what they really mean

Check-in and check-out Brace yourself — you usually can't check in to a villa until 4pm and check-out is 10am. The cleaner does have a *whole house* to turn around, after all. Bear this in mind when buying your flights. There's no point in booking the earliest departure if you're then left twiddling your thumbs (or distracting tired children) 'til 4pm.

Condo Or condominium. It's an American term for an apartment or flat.

Cot Good to know if you're a family renting a place Stateside. A 'cot' is a actually a pull-out or camp bed, and a 'crib' is a cot.

Half bath This is a bizarre American term that's used to describe a small bathroom, with no shower or bath (we call it a WC).

Kitchenette This is definitely not a full kitchen, so forget plans to whip up a five-course feast. Be prepared for a gas ring and a minibar fridge, possibly a kettle — it might also be in the same space as your lounge or dining room.



Odometer Many folk on the Continent will give house directions according to distance, especially if it's in a rural area with few road signs (eg, 'drive along this track for 3.2km') — so learn how to trip your vehicle's odometer before you set off from the car-rental office.

Twin bed We know you know what this is, but be aware that in much of Europe, a 'double' will be twin beds pushed together, which can be easily separated again if you prefer, or vice versa (just ask when booking).

Villa; Villa complex; Villa hotel It sounds obvious, but if you want on-site restaurants, reception desk and that extra blanket of security (but higher rental fees), then check in to the latter two. If you want complete privacy, go for the former.

Waterfront Remember this doesn't always mean beachfront, but can refer to lakes, mangroves, canals, marinas and such. Check the description and photographs carefully if you are intent on being by the shore.

Welcome pack In one house, this can mean a friendly note and a bottle of wine. In others, it can mean a fridge full of food with Prosecco on ice. Check exactly what is included before you arrive so you know what you need to buy from the supermarket on the way there.



Town House, in south London, is a very sexy pad for a Big Smoke weekend (sleeps 12; from £6,850). Finally, cosy Black Hill Farmhouse, in the Welsh Black Mountains, is a good option for both hen and stag parties (sleeps 17-29; from £2,150-£2,550).

RURAL RETREATS

USP: Great British self-catering

Because: It's easy to be disappointed by a holiday cottage that doesn't live up to those online pics — but since all the properties on Rural Retreats are vetted to ensure they're top quality (that's rare for big UK self-catering agencies), you're more likely to find they're better than you imagined. From pretty lighthouse cottages to quintessential Cotswolds-stone homes, British breaks have never looked less chintzy. All properties come with bounteous hampers and, in our experience, the owners go the extra mile — one even left us a handwritten welcome note (01386 897801, ruralretreats.co.uk).

Our fave five: The 17th-century stone Midsummer Cottage, in the gingerbread-house Cotswolds village of Stanton, looks good enough to eat

and is equipped with quality kitchen kit (sleeps 4; from £715). In north Devon, the romantic Woodland Cottage is set on a pretty lake and well-placed for countryside yomps (sleeps 2; from £700). It looks like a Swiss chalet, but Achnandarach Lodge is a roomy pad in stunning countryside in the Scottish Highlands, just 8km from a railway station (sleeps 9; from £1,200) — or, for something even quirkier, you can stay at a Kentish lighthouse (Khina Cottage; sleeps 4; from £715). After something grand? Book the ornate, 18th-century Temple of Diana, in Shropshire, amid sprawling swathes of Capability Brown parkland (sleeps 6; from £1,679).

WELCOME BEYOND

USP: Wow-factor pads

Because: Wow is what you'll utter when you step into any one of Welcome Beyond's properties, available in dozens of countries from Mexico to Germany. Personal touches (you actually know who the owners are) and design feature heavily in their preened pads — from mirror-clad houses in the wilds of Italy to California farmhouses — and while they do cater for that top



end of the spectrum, there are plenty of flash places to be had at real-people prices, too (00 49 163 7372509, welcomebeyond.com).

Our fave five: Creamy white Casas Caiadas, deep in the rural Alentejo yet just an hour's drive from Lisbon, looks like an ancient Portuguese farmhouse, but is a vision in cool modern minimalism within (sleeps 8; from £2,049). The bonkers, reflective Mirror Houses in the South Tyrol will get any minimalist-architecture fan's heart racing (sleeps 2-4; from £993-£1,158), while Thacher House in the Ojai Valley

Regal blues: opposite, Château du Royal, south of France. Above, clockwise from top left, Khina Cottage at North Foreland Lighthouse, Kent; Temple of Diana, Shropshire; Casa Inspiración, in Oaxaca, Mexico



of California is a picture-perfect ranch house and four pretty cottages, ideal for big family gatherings (sleeps 20; from £31,700). The thatch-roofed Casa Inspiración in Oaxaca, Mexico, is exactly that whitewashed beachside pad you've dreamed of (sleeps 14; from £6,836), and the Georgian Spitalfields Town House, in east London, is a blast-from-the-past pad with plush modern amenities (sleeps 4; from £1,440).

AVENUE

USP: A-lister crashpads

Because: Sometimes, only Mick Jagger's Mustique pad will do. Avenue's founder, Annabel Brooks, is as well connected as her sister-in-law, the media exec Rebekah, persuading 'villarati' from Brazil to the Balearics to open their homes to holiday hoi polloi like you and me. Actually, not me: Avenue is awesomely pricey — endorsements

come from the likes of Jeremy Clarkson and Sophie Dahl. Nuff said (020 7043 2188, avenueproperty.com).

Our fave five: Mick Jagger's Stargroves, on Mustique, comprises seven pavilions in tropical gardens above L'Ansecoy Bay (sleeps 10; from £11,400). Along the coast from Saint-Tropez, Château du Royal has Brigitte Bardot written all over the terraced-garden suntraps tumbling down to the sea (sleeps 20; from £19,390). Turning the 'crazy' dial down somewhat is Jupiter Villa, on the Greek island of Skiathos — a Kevin McCloud fantasy of minimalist Zen decor and glass (sleeps 12; from £11,630). Designed by Manuel Aires Mateus, Portugal's architect to the stars, Les Terrasses de Comporta, set in expansive private grounds, lords it over Melides village, not far from the Atlantic (sleeps 8; from £4,660). One hour north of Sydney, Palm Beach Villa has >



Where the artis: from left, the 16th-century Villa Goga, near Siena; pool at Elissa, Paxos; Domaine Cahors in the Lot. Opposite, Agnos House, Corfu



wall-to-wall windows overlooking sea and beach (sleeps 8; from £6,925).

IONIAN VILLAS

USP: Ionian islands

Because: The founder, David Watrous — ex-MD of Greek Island Club — has lived and breathed Ionian villas for 40-plus years. There's nothing prohibitively flash about the 200-odd properties on his books, but all have been scrutinised by Watrous (or his wife Vivienne and son Alex), and offer affordable, flexible lengths of stay, with fixed changeover days confined to high season (01243 820928, ionian-villas.co.uk).

Our fave five: Kefallonia properties book up fast, but Marika is new to Ionian Villas this year, so word is not yet out (sleeps 4; from £870). On Ithaca, Koukla has a private pool above pretty Kioni Bay (sleeps 5; from £670). On Paxos, a five-minute stroll from Lakka's beaches and tavernas, Elissa has killer views and a 9m pool (sleeps 6; from £950). Corfu's 300-year-old Perivoli has a glorious terraced garden, with views over bougainvillea to Corfu Town (sleeps 6; from £1,130). Tiny pools get your goat? Victoria on Lefkada (Lefkas on website) has a 12m pool for lengths before breakfast in the cypress hills above Vliho (sleeps 8; from £1,080).

SCOTT WILLIAMS

USP: Dishy click-bait — for families, too

Because: The company tagline 'Unique access to extraordinary houses' is, if

anything, underselling it. Cotswold chums Victoria Hooberman and Maymie White have two bulging black books of contacts, and they're not afraid to use them. Their website lists about 100 sighingly gorgeous properties in Europe, Morocco and Turkey, but ring them and they'll whisper the names of one or two more, whose owners prefer things on the downlow (01749 812721, scottwilliams.co.uk).

Our fave five: With nine children between them, Victoria and Maymie are great on family villas: in Umbria, Posabile has a soft-play room, fenced garden, trampoline and table tennis (sleeps 12; from £3,239). Near Loggos on Paxos, Kipos Beach House lies on a cobalt cove for morning dips (sleeps 12; from £10,000). Agnos House is a rustic-luxe stone cottage among olives on northeastern Corfu (sleeps 13; from £16,000). 'Off-the-scale beautiful', says Victoria of Dar Ourika, just south of Marrakech, with its garden designed by a Chelsea gold medallist, Berber-chic interiors, chef and tennis court (sleeps 14; from £12,000). In the Lot, Domaine Cahors is a large-party pile in 35 private hectares with a tennis court, games room and chef (sleeps 20; from £7,500).

What I learned No.2

When the house doesn't match the description

'Not only was our last villa not as advertised (dirty, broken bulbs, scummy pool) the supermarket was not the "pleasantly short walk down the road" described. It was a 20-minute uphill hike (and a struggle for grandparents). There was also constant traffic noise.'

The solution: 'Check the distances on Google Maps rather than trust the owner's description. And use Google Earth to see if routes are treacherous.' Callie Ford, Bath

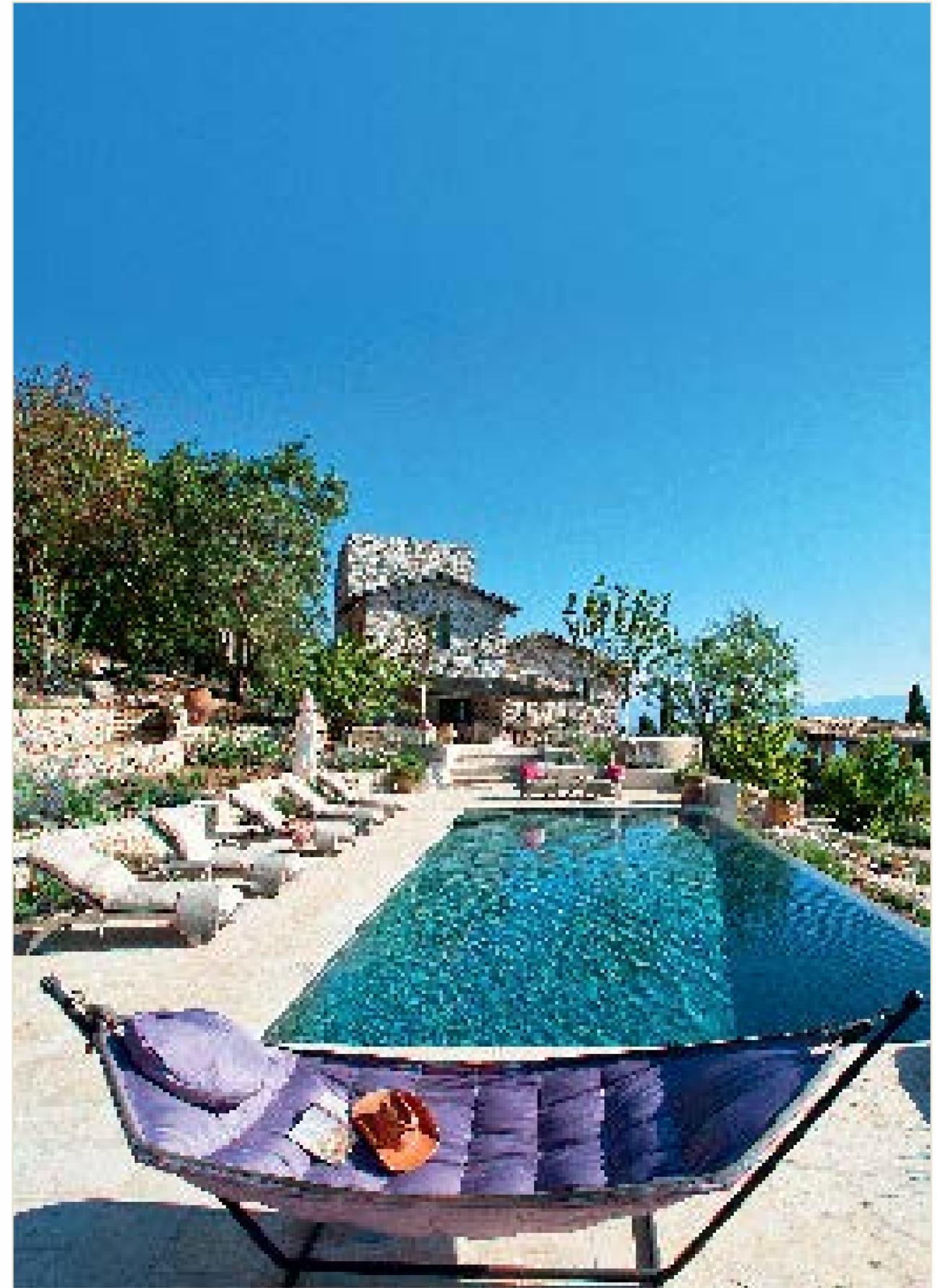


INVITATION TO TUSCANY

USP: Old-money Tuscany (with Provence and Italian Lakes on the side)

Because: This is Dan Wrightson's domain — the company director, he grew up on a farm near Siena after his good-lifer parents swapped Merseyside for Tuscany. Wrightson is also an artist — he studied at art school in Florence — and, by Giotto, it shows in his portfolio of 200-odd villas, all with pools, all regularly visited by Wrightson and his small team of Italian and English staff (020 8003 6970, invitationtotuscany.com).

Our fave five: Perched high in the Apuan Alps, Casa Argento has a hot tub on decking that spawned a recent marriage proposal (sleeps 2; from £714). Privacy a priority? Olivo lies a kilometre down its own dusty track above Radicondoli (sleeps 4; from £728). In the rolling Sienese hills, Villa Goga is a 16th-century mansion in extensive grounds — perfect for a large family celebration (sleeps 20; from £4,213). Podere Le Mandrie is a wonderfully weathered, effortlessly chic Joanna Lumley of a villa, sunning itself in deep-green hills south of Siena (sleeps 8; from £2,760). Or how about Casa del Pescatore, a fisherman's cottage all but dipping a toe in Lake Como (sleeps 8; from £2,432)? >





✔ **Torch:** Particularly useful if you arrive at night and need to look for keys or read keybox codes. Also handy for evening walks to the beach or local village.

✔ **Printed/handwritten villa address:** Just in case you can't get a signal on your smartphone (also useful to hand to a taxi driver if you don't speak the language).

✔ **Tupperware:** Great for holding picnic ingredients for day trips, or storing leftovers that absent guests (sleeping teens, say) can scoff later.

✔ **Sat-nav:** Essential for finding the villa (even if you're on public transport) when the owner's given poor directions, or you initially followed the owner to the house and later need to find it alone. The best free GPS app, we've found, is Google Maps.

✔ **Small first-aid kit:** The hospital may be some distance from your villa — always locate the handiest doctor and late-night pharmacy.

✔ **Games and pool toys:** These can make your villa feel more

homely for the kids, and stackable or inflatable pool toys take up minimal room in your case.

✔ **Plug adaptors:** A cheap travel adaptor will do for European houses (£2.49 for five; amzn.to/1TRFpcD), and a multi-socket extension cord if you have lots of gadgets.

✔ **Teabags, salt and pepper:** Most villa welcome hampers include the basics, but not the most 'basic' basics; pack these items and save euros at the supermarket.

✔ **Swiss Army knife:** The scissors, tin/bottle opener and screwdriver will get you out of countless unpredictable situations, even if it's only changing batteries in your child's favourite toy. (NB, don't pack it in your cabin case!)

✔ **Baby kit:** Travel-tee seat/potty, play mat (for those hard tiled floors), plug-in insect repellent, blackout blind (plenty of villas have no curtains), baby monitor, non-slip bath mat, car booster seat (can be used at the dining table and restaurants, too).

✔ **HDMI cables:** A godsend when you realise the TV in your villa only has three Portuguese-language channels — pack your tablet or laptop and you can watch streamed TV shows and downloaded films.



AIRBNB

USP: Their world, your oyster

Because: Whatever you want (two million homes and treehouses, igloos and beach huts), wherever you want it (191 countries), they've probably got it, with a great search engine connecting you straight to property owners. City apartments are their bread and butter. 'Wherever you go, don't go there, live there. Even if it's just for a night,' says the website. More than 60 million customers since 2008? They're on to something (airbnb.co.uk).

Our fave five: In Paris's historic 11th *arrondissement*, property No. 321897 is an elegant two-bedroom flat, five minutes from Le Marais (sleeps 3; from £635). In Manhattan, property No. 2629613 is a recently renovated 1910 brownstone in Chelsea (sleeps 2; from £1,478). In Cape Town, property No. 11598750 is a fashion-shoot

fabulous spare room opening onto terrace and pool, five minutes' walk from Camps Bay (sleeps 2; from £370). In Thailand, Villa Moonshadow is a Crusoe-chic jungle lair positioned above the beach on Koh Samui (sleeps 8; from £6,315; No. 2757522). Or how about a modern, open-plan Brazilian beach house with a private stretch of sand? It sleeps eight, but a couple can have it for £879 a week (No. 156247; sleeps 8; from £3,350).

HOMEAWAY

USP: Hotline to homeowners

Because: As the homepage says, 'It's your holiday. Why share it?' You see, unlike its rival, Airbnb, which also offers hotels, hostels and spare rooms in owners' houses, HomeAway only does whole holiday homes. What you don't get is much vetting — with more than one million properties in 190 countries,



it'd be a tough ask — but guest reviews provide a decent cross-check (020 8827 1971, homeaway.co.uk). **Our fave five:** Owned by an interior designer, Rose-in-Vale farmhouse is a stylish Cornish cottage near Falmouth with slate-and-wood interiors (sleeps 4; from £1,060). On Lefkada in Greece, Villa Eclipse does billowing drapes and daybeds by the pool, with staggering views over Vasiliki beach (sleeps 4; from £952). On a coral cliff overlooking Foul Bay beach on Barbados, Astra is an airy three-bedroom villa with a large pool (sleeps 6; from £1,862). Hip Ibiza?

Night on the tiles: opposite, the lantern-lit patio at Dar Sana riad, Marrakech. Above, jungle beauty Villa Moonshadow, Thailand; inset, cool, cubic Villa Estrella, Ibiza

Villa Estrella has cool, white lines and a foreverness of glass in a pine-clad hectare above Siesta (sleeps 12; from £9,921). Near Cape Town, Noordhoek House is an open-plan new-build with vaulted ceiling, decking pool and vast picture windows over Chapman's Peak (sleeps 8; from £937).

CV VILLAS

USP: Posh Med minus the overdraft

Because: Corfu Villas pioneered the whole villa rental thing back in the '70s, doing such a good job that Corfu became known as Kensington-on-Sea. Now known as CV Villas, the company possesses so much Med cred that many of Europe's plush pads are available only exclusively through them. They can also sell flights and car-hire — sparing you a slow death by a thousand clicks on Skyscanner (020 3773 9282, cvvillas.com).

Our fave five: In Marrakech's medina, Dar Sana is a tiny riad with shaded courtyard and lantern-lit roof terrace (sleeps 2; £901, B&B). Nowhere on Corfu beats Katerina for location. Perched above its own clear cove, the hilltop villa is a short walk from Kerasia beach and San Stefanos's tavernas (sleeps 6; from £2,522). Blu Infinito may look like a traditional Sicilian farmhouse from the outside, but step inside and you'll find it full of design touches — wrought-iron beds, faded oriental rugs — with cane loungers beside the panoramic pool (sleeps 8; from £2,450). In Turkey, Kayra is a glass-and-marble designer villa with quite sensational infinity-pool views over Kalkan (sleeps 10; from £1,259). Ripa Bianca is a rambling Umbrian farmhouse with original art and antiques, a thyme-scented garden and pool gazing across the hills above Orvieto (sleeps 10; from £2,226). >



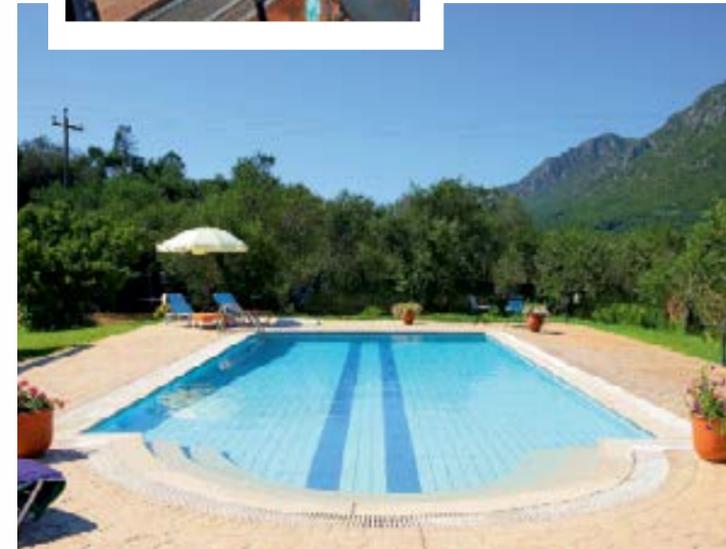
VINTAGE TRAVEL

USP: Mid-range Med with pools
Because: You know how hideous it is, trawling the internet for flights? Well, Vintage Travel will do it for you for free, leaving you to shop for bikinis and ogle the website. Once you're on holiday, Vintage Travel reps or local agents steer you towards the deserted beach at the end of the winding track, or the taverna with the best *kleftiko* (01954 261431, vintagetravel.co.uk).
Our fave five: A 15-minute walk through olive groves to Prasoudi beach on Corfu, Adonis has a roof terrace just made for holiday novels (sleeps 4; from £675). On Lanzarote, Villa Clara is a whitewashed suntrap in Tías village — a rarity on an island where most villas are in the resorts (sleeps 6; from £650). On Mallorca, Ca'n Paulo rolls out sleek, geometric interiors, with vast glass bringing the outside in and a pool bar

with beer pump (sleeps 12; £1,550). Every aristocratic inch the 17th-century mansion, with tennis court and games room, Quinta de São Bento, north of Porto, is a steal at less than £140pp a week (sleeps 12; from £1,650). Ultra-modern Elmas, in Turkey, has mighty views from kitchen, bedroom, terrace and infinity pool over the Lycian Coast (sleeps 10; from £1,550).
MR & MRS SMITH
USP: Sheer Balearic bliss — at wallet-busting prices
Because: The real-life Mr & Mrs Smith — aka James Lohan and his wife, Tamara Heber-Percy — are on a one-couple mission against holiday horrors, after a spa break from hell inspired them to launch their own hotel guide in 2003. Since March they've been doing villas, too: 58 of them, all big on sex appeal, all in Mallorca and Ibiza, all personally

Siesta style: above, bedroom in Villa Luxe, Mallorca. Opposite, clockwise from top left, Villa Vigneto Villagrande, Sicily; the Cretan crashpad Villa Kamy; pool at Adonis, Corfu

vetted by the fussy folk at Smith HQ, with an airport meet-and-greet and 24/7 local concierge (0330 100 3180, mrandmrsmith.com).
Our fave five: Can Frigola is all about outdoor living, with an open-air gym, poolside daybeds and a roof terrace overlooking Ibiza's west coast (sleeps 6; from £3,660). Near San Josep in Ibiza, Can Love is a chic, heaven-on-baked-earth *finca*, with sea views from hammock and pool, and a pasha's palace of a roof terrace (sleeps 8; from £6,275). Two families, small kids? Try six-bedroom Villa Frondosa, which has a playground, trampoline and tennis court, 10 minutes' toddle from Ibiza's Aguas Blancas beach (sleeps 12; from £7,844). On Mallorca, Villa Picasso is five minutes from Pollença, with a sumptuous pool house (sleeps 8; from £4,097); cliff-top Villa Luxe has a sauna, wine cellar, art gallery-like interiors



and an infinity pool with dizzying coastal views (sleeps 12; from £13,944).
MASSIMO VILLAS
USP: Sicily, inside out
Because: Local boy and founder Massimo knows Sicily so intimately, you shouldn't be surprised if your butcher or *gelato* seller asks how he's doing once you've checked in to your villa. What this means is that every nook of the destination is covered, often by one-off homes that Massimo has persuaded his friends to rent out. But that doesn't mean it's high-end only — he rents a handful of stylish, historic converted flats on the beach in Cefalù from just £525 per week (020 3529 8013, massimovillas.com).
Our fave five: Owned by Massimo himself, Villa Rita in beachy Cefalù, on the north coast, is *bambino*-tastic, with swings, a garden slide and toys

(sleeps 8; from £1,977), while Orizzonte Blu, near Noto, is a stylish one-level house in farmland, which also welcomes families (sleeps 8; from £2,174). Terra di Sole has a stonking pool overlooking the sea close to Licata, in the south (sleeps 10; from £1,557); Villa Jamal, near southwesterly Selinunte, has gardens a-go-go (sleeps 6; from £1,574); and Villa Vigneto Villagrande sits right in the middle of a vineyard, with views of Mount Etna (sleeps 8; from £2,767).
A&K VILLAS
USP: Euro luxe
Because: Founder Geoffrey Kent was born on safari, and raised on the family farm in Kenya. What's that got to do with your villa? Well, his company might now have a name for luxe — Bill Gates, Tom Hanks and Henry Kissinger are all clients — but adventure is still at its

What I learned No.3
No extra guests allowed
 'To celebrate my 50th, my wife and I booked a swish Tuscan villa — it was just us two, though the house had three big bedrooms. One night we had friends over from another villa, and my daughter joined us for a surprise. However, when the owners found out, they wouldn't return our £200 deposit as we 'weren't allowed extra overnight guests'.
The solution: 'As far as villa owners are concerned, their cleaning bill rises as guests increase. I didn't realise this. I also didn't appreciate they'd given us a small occupancy discount. Next time, I'll run our plans by the agency and get permission in writing, too. The whole experience was really embarrassing.'
 Les Johnson, southeast London



heart, 'experiential' a key A&K buzzword. Villas are picked for their X factor, not just their look (01242 547705, akvillas.com).
Our fave five: On the second floor of a 13th-century palazzo, Vista Siena lies right on the Piazza del Campo, stage of the infamous Palio (sleeps 2; from £1,360). In France, seemingly carved from the cliffs of Gordes, Lou Roucas — cream plaster, solid stone floors — is a 17th-century village house with views of the Luberon from bedrooms, terrace and pool (sleeps 6; from £2,072). Don't care what it costs? On Croatia's Dalmatian Coast, Ray Residence is a 200-year-old villa gazing across terraced gardens and the Adriatic to Dubrovnik, with spa, gym and wine cellar, of course (sleeps 14; from £34,146). On Crete, Villa Kamy is Richard Rogers meets Robinson Crusoe: a geometric temple of stone-and-glass gorgeousness-on-sea (sleeps 10; from £3,019). Maromais is a four-hectare Andalucian estate, with two whitewashed, hilltop villas (sleeps 14; from £6,976).

JAMES VILLAS
USP: Cheap 'n' cheerful, bags of choice
Because: Founder Jimmy Needham was heavily influenced by his father-in-law, a union man — contracts were sacrosanct, villa owners were always paid, so they signed up in droves. Today James Villas is one of the UK's biggest specialists, offering a staggering range of homes and apartments in Morocco, the Caribbean, Mediterranean and US (0800 074 0122, jamesvillas.co.uk).
Our fave five: Croatian decor can seem stuck naffly in the '80s, but Villa Filip — with its bleached floorboards, floor-to-ceiling sea views, hot tub, tennis court and pool — is as hip as any Cornish beach shack (sleeps 4; from £1,894; pictured overleaf). A short stroll from Galley Bay on Antigua's pretty northwest coast, Villa Daydream has a wrap-around terrace with pool and ocean view (sleeps 4; from £3,031). Côte d'Azur postcodes don't come cheap, but with a 10m pool and a rosemary-scented garden looking out over vineyards to Grimaud castle, Villa Rose is a bargain (sleeps 8; from £1,855). Half an hour's drive from Disneyland, 40 minutes from Orlando airport, Abacos Apartments are gleaming, modern family pads at Bahama Bay Resort (sleeps 6; from £800). On Fuerteventura, 20 minutes' walk from Villaverde village, Horizonte is a two-family bargain, with four >



Decks appeal: James Villas' Villa Filip, Croatia. Opposite, grand Rocca delle Tre Contrade, Sicily

The villa rulebook
Your checklist for success

bedrooms, a pool table and heated swimming pool (sleeps 10; from £984).

THE THINKING TRAVELLER

USP: Quality guaranteed

Because: So passionate are founders Huw and Rosella, they ditched their high-octane jobs in Paris to start afresh in Sicily in 2002. Soon they were letting friends' villas. Today, TTT's villas can be rented only through them. 'It means we can invest time and money,' says Huw. 'The ultimate quality control.' Local concierges augment a personal service (020 7377 8518, thethinkingtraveller.com).

Our fave five: On Sicily, Al Profondo Blu is a seafront hideaway on a private nature reserve (sleeps 6; from £2,685), while Rocca delle Tre Contrade is a 19th-century Downton with maid, cook, 25m pool and views over Etna and the sea (sleeps 12-24; from £8,875-£12,963). In Puglia, Trullo Gaura is a beautifully finished *trullo* — the conical-roofed construction of the region — with gardens and a pool (sleeps 8; from £4,355). Cut off by olives and pines, Jura, on Greece's Alonissos, has four bedrooms spilling onto a terrace with dining area and pool (sleeps 8; from £3,874). On Meganisi, Akrothea has garden-gate access to the sea, an infinity pool and daily maid service (sleeps 10; from £4,032). ■

What I learned No.1

Breakages

'We arrived to find the furniture was run-down and the fans didn't work. To top it all off, at the end of the trip the owners charged us for torn sun loungers and a broken bannister, which we did not damage.'

The solution: 'The owner said I should have told her about the breakages on day one and taken photos as evidence. I will do next time. In future, I'll be less likely to use a direct-to-owner site as there's not enough comeback. I'll book with an established rental agency so that, if the villa falls short, they can move us at once.'

Martin Thackray, Bristol



DO ask for more: Villa agencies are in direct communication with homeowners, so ask about free extras. Keen to stay competitive, the owners might throw in car hire, a private chef or free housekeeping.

DON'T be fooled by the bed count: It may say it sleeps 12, but large-capacity villas often accommodate some guests on sofas/beds. If you each want your own bedroom, read the specs carefully.

DO outsmart the system: Many owners list their property both independently and with rental agencies. Agents will often

change its name, making it harder to find cheaper elsewhere. Instead, Google the villa description to find out who else is listing it and for what price.

DON'T be scared by the high price: Villas tend to be listed by the price for the whole property, not the price per person. This means a £400-a-night luxury villa that sleeps 12 is in fact only £33 a night per person. Not so scary!

DO turn away staff if you want privacy: Some villas, especially in Asia, will include housekeepers — there is nothing wrong with asking them to clean less often or visit only when you are out.

DON'T forget to ask about additional fees: Pool heating and air-con can be pricey, and

cleaning may not be included. Some villas even charge to rent out bed linen and towels. Read the small print.

DO travel with like-minded friends: Who will cook? Can the kids stay up late? Who will drive? Will you split food bills? Who gets the best room — should they pay more? Decide all this *beforehand*.

DON'T expect to be greeted upon arrival: You're usually left to sort yourself out — no help with luggage, no meet and greet. Expect a key-collection point and a welcome book or hamper. That's it.

DO make note of when you'll arrive: Getting lost in the dark is no fun. Write down directions, have some photos of the villa and the owners' contact details.



WORDS: KATIE BOWMAN, JEREMY LAZELL, ALCIA MILLER, HANNAH RALPH. PHOTOGRAPHS: 4CORNERS, GETTY