

Travel Feature

## Sensational Villa Vacations

Shivani Vora, 05.10.07, 12:01 AM ET

Done with five-star resorts? Over luxury suites? Things could be worse.

Still, if you want a taste of high living without having to deal with nosy neighbors or throngs of tourists, you might want to look into taking on a second home--via a villa.

"The affluent consumer expects the luxury experience, and today, villas are being built bigger and better," says Misty Ewing, director of public relations at Virtuoso, a network of agents specializing in luxury travel. "They have that wow factor."

Travelers are increasingly seeking villa vacations in part because of a desire to escape in larger groups.

"Especially since Sept. 11, 2001, people have a greater sense of appreciation of spending time with family and friends," says Rod Cabron, spokesman for Yesawich, Pepperdine, Brown & Russell, a Florida-based marketing firm that specializes in travel. "Everyone is time starved so traveling with the people you care about is a good way to spend quality time together."

But the ability to house a large party is not the only draw to renting a villa.

### Culture Seekers

Villa rental specialists say that some guests choose to stay in private homes as a means of soaking up local culture.

"Wealthy people have done the hotel thing," says Maija Palkeinen, vice president of HomesAway, a Toronto-based villa rental agency that focuses on luxury rentals. "Now, they want to live in a region and know it from a unique perspective."

What's also unique are the amenities that come with some rentals. Many villas, particularly in Europe, offer the services of a local host.

"If you do a trip out of a hotel, you rely on guidebooks or a concierge," Palkeinen says. "Hosts can do things like introduce you to the town baker or arrange a private tasting with a winemaker. You get to tap into what the region is all about."

### Helping Hands

Some villas come equipped with full staffs seemingly of another era. Renting the Villa Il Borro, nestled among the vineyards of Tuscany, Italy, means getting the services of a butler, a maid and a dinner chef. The Ferragamo family-owned property features 10 bedrooms, 10 baths, a fitness room, a garden-view terrace and two swimming pools--one indoor, one outdoor. This kind of luxury doesn't come cheap: Prepare to shell out 33,000 euros (about \$44,550) for a week's stay.

If you favor oceanfront living, then check out Cerulean Villa in Anguilla, Caribbean. This 13,000-square-foot property, which rents for \$33,000 a week, has seven bedrooms and eight-and-a-half baths. There's also a pool, a Jacuzzi, a tennis court, an in-house spa and an outdoor garden with a fountain. It comes with a staff of 14 including a general manager, a concierge, three maids, three butlers and a culinary team complete with a sous chef and a separate breakfast cook.

Even hotels, aware that some guests seek more secluded stays, are getting in on the act.

"Hotels are building villas in reaction to competition in the leisure market from [independent] villa rentals," says Scott Berman, a partner in the Hospitality and Leisure advisory group at PricewaterhouseCoopers.

The \$2,200-a-night Presidential Villa at the Evanson Hideaway & Six Senses at Ana Mandara, Vietnam, is a secluded two-bedroom waterfront home. Guests access the home through wooden walkways built on a mountainside. Here, they will find their own spa treatment room, an infinity plunge pool, a wine cellar and a 24-hour butler.

Of course, you should expect to pay for privacy. Luxury villas, says Palkeinen, often run at least \$10,000 a week.

But with a butler running around after you, a private chef cooking your favorite foods on demand and all the local culture you can handle, the pricey tab will be a distant memory. Renting the villa, however, will be a lasting one.