

## VILLAS

By Barbara Ann Rosenberg

More and more people contemplating a vacation are looking for a change from an ordinary hotel stay; for an opportunity to live like a local in the country of one's choice, at least a local who has the means to hop up to a more distinctive way of living - - "

So, is it possible to rent a villa for a change of pace as a vacation destination? A cottage or, perhaps, even a castle?

It gets easier and easier to segue into the elegance of villa living - - and at almost any price one is able, or willing, to spend for the experience. And if one is interested, villas come at a lower rental price in Spain and Italy than in the south of France where the "Riviera" and the "Cote d'Azur" have for years projected the image of ultra-glamorous style.

There are, in addition, whole industries that have risen over the past several years devoted to luring sophisticated travelers to enjoy the relatively mild winter climate in the south of Spain - - and there are now several airlines eager to partner in packages designed to provide travelers a different experience from the usual hotel stay, something so different that they will have endless, hopefully fascinating, stories to share with friends and colleagues.

So, to embark on the "research" for how to go about finding an appropriate accommodation, one has only to look in one of the many publications devoted to the travel industry - - where there are myriad tempting advertisements. It seems that now options are numerous and varied and there are agencies that are more than willing, even eager, to arrange accommodations, at a price that depends on the facility and the level of assistance and ingenuity the agency provides

A splendid example of a villa rented by the owner is in Tuscany, Italy, specifically in the hills north of Lucca, the town famous for its exquisite olive oil. This particular property sleeps six in a restored traditional farmhouse with a well equipped kitchen that opens to a terrace, ideal for al fresco dining. In the garden with far reaching views there is a large swimming pool. At current exchange rates this property rents for about \$5000 a week, including two hours of maid service per day. There is actually some some variation, depending on the time of year.

For a more structured approach, people often prefer to rent through an agency rather than directly with an owner. Wimco is a well-run organization with offices in choice locations and contacts in several of the world's most desired destinations.

For example, WIMCO represents about 200 villas in France, from Menton (near the Italian border) to St. Tropez, a well-known playground of movie stars and other celebrities. Then, for an even more upscale agency, there's Homes Away, dealing in personalized vacations based exclusively in private properties for stays of one week or more.

Prices at Homes Away vary according to the season and length of visit, but always at top drawer cost, befitting the range of services provided: arrival shopping, comprehensive regional guidebooks, extra staff (such as cooks, drivers, child care etc.)

Another agency, with more varied choices is Rentvillas.com which has been in business since 1984, with rates as low as \$19 per day per person. Comments from past clients testify to experiences such as "taking over an entire castle to accommodate a family for a wedding". This allows people to step out of the tourist mode and into the lifestyle and culture of a country.

The government of France has long sponsored an extensive department called Gites de France, representing a broad assortment of places to stay, ranging from a modest apartment to a multi-bedroom house, some even with swimming pools. The furnishings, too, vary in these Gites (the literal translation of "gite" is a "shepherd's hut"). Sometimes the description of a place comes across as being more exquisite than it really is, but all of the places, inspected by government representatives, if not lovely, are certainly livable. Prospective renters have to be on the alert, however, for remote locations, perhaps more difficult to get to markets and highways, making traveling around the area more cumbersome than one would wish for on a limited time vacation.

Nevertheless, whatever the concept of "villa", it is certainly offers a retreat less structured than a hotel or motel, and, therefor, much more attractive as an alternative for people seeking a bit of freedom to be on their own, yet sheltered, in another country.

Spain, particularly in the south, has for years, offered visitors many choices of places to kick back and relax. Its varied selections are many, although, the Spanish beaches hold out apartment hotels, rather than free standing villas as the major tourist attraction in the area. These comfortable, often extremely reasonable, apartments are equipped with rudimentary kitchens to prepare the riches of that part of the easygoing country. But, for people without the inclination actually to cook, there are myriad places to buy and serve in the privacy of one's rental, selections of small delicious specialty plates known as tapas, providing the illusion of having a staff that prepared the meals of the day without the burden of providing necessary supervision.

While not on the same level of potential luxury as villas, the Spanish apartment hotels allow visitors unstructured freedom and comfort in their own way, again, as an easy alternative to traditional hotel living.

Then, there are numerous castles for lease in Spain, some dating back as far as the 8th Century. Some of them are clustered into an organization known as Paradores, offering more than the typical resort holiday. And Paradores are not just located in castles; they are also found in convents, forts and manor houses - - again allowing visitors to experience anything but a "cookie cutter" vacation. So, whether in a villa in a strict interpretation of the word, or a castle, a convent or other singular place to stay, Spain, along with Italy and France provide their visitors with truly peerless experiences: experiences that cannot easily be matched in a "normal" hotel. Booked individually or through an agency, these unique properties may change forever the approach of the people who stay in them. And that's what vacationing is meant to do.