

VILLAS

The luxury of being left alone

There is comfort in your own thoughts – even more so when you know help is just around the corner

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GREVE IN CHIANTI, ITALY

When you arrive in Tuscany, you can expect certain things: statuesque trees standing vis-a-vis amid rolling hills, soft sunrises and sunsets, vistas that keep people coming from the world over and sumptuous food that keeps them coming back.

What I had not expected was to be alone. As my car took me to the hill, the keys were waiting for me just beside the door of the villa. But I could not enter right away. I was so drawn to the view.

I walked around the corner, and there we were – just me and a turquoise infinity pool, the rich, green hills standing in stunning contrast to the water. I could not see a single other dwelling, or road, or power line, let alone another villa. I was flabbergasted.

Being alone is something I crave more when I travel. Being a social fella, I never thought the day would come.

But I am even more demanding than that. I want to be alone when I want to be alone – and I want all the trappings of convenience. Periodically, I've happened across such experiences: when I was upgraded to a separate poolhouse at the Dar Zemor hotel in Marrakesh; when I found a house standing alone in the Andes that was part of a small, rustic hotel nearby; even when I rent a summer house in Trinity Bay, Nfld., each year, knowing a handyman and an amazing meal are a phone call away. There is comfort in your own thoughts – even more so when you know help (or an excellent piece of cod and side of greens) is just around the corner. Invisible, but there. Such as it was with the beautiful Tuscan property, a four-bedroom home that was one of many private residences on this



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PHOTOS: EXCLUSIVE RESORTS

particular estate. (So I'm told, I had no idea there were others until I got back.) It is owned by Exclusive Resorts, a destination club that offers its members the opportunity to vacation for 20 days a year in luxurious residences all over the world.

Instead of buying a cottage, with all its obligations on time and the responsibilities of ownership, you pay a one-time fee for membership, then annual dues. It's not cheap, but it's a cheaper alternative for those considering a second home or whiling away in five-star hotels. (For more information, see page 7.)

It was the attention to detail that got me. Members have dedicated ambassadors and concierges that ask what wines you prefer and foods you like and then, voilà, the pantry and cellar are stocked when you arrive. When the other members of my group finally joined me after gallivanting through the countryside on their rented Vespas – a tour arranged by our ambassador, Isabella – they found me, mouth

agape, staring into a fridge jammed with our favourite snacks. (Exclusive Resorts keeps track of your preferences so, as you travel from property to property, the process is seamless.)

We made ravioli from scratch that night, something none of us thought we could do. Coached by an excellent local chef and a little red wine, we overcame our inhibitions and ate the fruits of our own hands before retiring poolside. The next night, we made pizza. Days were spent visiting Florence and Siena, or simply lazing away by that gorgeous pool. Isabella was always a phone call away when we needed her (or just wanted her good company), but never when we didn't.

For that, I am grateful. In today's world of almost constant contact, perhaps the greatest luxury is to be left alone.

The writer travelled as a guest of Exclusive Resorts. It did not review or approve this article.

Special to The Globe and Mail

VILLA HUNTING

Renting a villa isn't going to be cheap, but the price tag doesn't have to be stratospheric.

Airbnb: Not just for cheap apartment rentals, you can find gorgeous homes for your extended clan, too. How about a five-bedroom, five-bath beauty on an Acagan island? It's got a children's loft and even includes a Turkish steam bath. Sleeps 16 and it's yours for a not unreasonable \$5,480 a week. airbnb.ca/rooms/84236

Smaller families might enjoy a modern, design-focused ecotreat in a Costa Rican rain forest. Lots of glass for grand views of the surf and Nosara beaches. Three bedrooms and two baths for \$1,604 a week. airbnb.ca/rooms/240270

Villas of Distinction: If you don't want to do all the searching, a brokerage can help. Villas of Distinction rents holiday homes in 50 countries. There's no membership fee to use the service, and the company arranges whatever you need. A six-bedroom, 13,000-square-foot oceanfront villa in Puerto Vallarta, for example, comes with a chef, bartender, butler and housekeepers – and starts at \$2,466 (U.S.) a week. villasofdistinction.com

Think Sicily: Got your heart set on this Mediterranean island? Try this London-based service that has ranked highly in recent Condé Nast surveys. For the biggest, most opulent homes, search by "exquisite villas." thethinkingtraveller.com

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