

Stand in line: cypress trees in Val d'Orcia; the writer's sons making a splash; church, Sarteano; family lunch in the pergola. Opposite, the tiny Cappella di Vitaleta, San Quirico d'Orcia

Famiglia ground

Three generations, one holiday! A very special Tuscan villa is home from home for **Jeremy Lazell** and gang, inside *and* out...

It was a poo that did it. My toddler's poo, floating like a final straw in a Seychelles hotel pool. The honeymooners didn't like it. Nor did my wife: 'Can we please not do hotels again 'til the kids have left home?' she asked. So began our love affair with villas.

Because as any parent will tell you, villas are the ultimate answer to the age-old question: how the hell can you holiday with kids and not die of shame? Villas are isolation units in the sun, they're holding pens with pools – and there's that added bonus/drawback (delete as necessary): the grandparents can come, too.

There are pitfalls, mind. Too remote is boring; too posh frays the nerves; too little garden and there will be tantrums. Not all of them from the kids. We've had overbearing owners living on-site in Andalucía; lorries crunching gears outside the bedroom on Corsica; on Zakynthos, the maid's son drowned kittens in our pool.

Then 15 years ago, we found it. The One. Tuscany. And Umbria. OK – the Two. We found the Two. It was the sheer abundance of traditional, hilltop villas here that swung it: farmers built high to catch the cooling breeze, so now you can't move for villas with mighty views: cypresses dotting the landscape, tractors pooling between vines,



Dream day trip:
THE CROWD-FREE CITY

Quieter than the region's big hitters, Lucca is a handsome, low-key city not far from Pisa. Its broad, tree-lined ramparts are the perfect spot for the classic Italian passeggiata. Beforehand, get your bird's-eye view of terracotta rooftops from the top of the Guinigi Tower (lemuradilucca.it/torri/torre-guinigi; £3.50), quirkily planted with seven oak trees – you'll need their shade as it's 230 steps up!

no development. And what to do? Endless gorgeous towns, and the wineries in between, that's what.

So you could stick a pin in any Tumbrian villa brochure page and be happy. Stick it on Casa del Pastore, though, and you should crack open the Prosecco now. Fifty minutes south of Siena, lording it over Val d'Orcia from a heartstoppingly secluded hillside perch, Casa del Pastore is the villa to beat all villas.

Why? Well, location counts for a lot. A kilometre from its nearest neighbour, staring out across a cypress-spiked valley towards Mount Amiata, Casa del Pastore has location in spades. 'It's quite castle-y,' says the eight-year-old on our first approach down the dusty track. It's not. It's a traditional Tuscan farmhouse. But the dizzying isolation, the towering views... Castle-y isn't far off.

It's also decidedly posh. But not prissy posh. It's solid, practical, farmhouse posh, with exposed stone walls, chunky terracotta tiles, antique dressers, worn oak tables, and well-loved sofas in the lounge. And right off the kitchen? Table tennis and table football. 'Make yourself at home,' it says. 'You won't break anything.' Now, I'm the father of three boys, and I've lost villa deposits from Sicily to the south of France, so unbreakability is a big deal.

So, too, are the multi-generational boxes Casa del Pastore ticks: all bedrooms are en-suite, so no waking up



AS A FATHER OF THREE, I'VE LOST VILLA DEPOSITS FROM SICILY TO THE SOUTH OF FRANCE – UNBREAKABILITY IS THEREFORE A BIG DEAL

when granny goes to the loo at night; super-thick walls so granny doesn't hear the kids' early starts; good wi-fi, even outside; twin dishwashers to keep the workload down and flies to a minimum... But it would all count for *niente* if the outside weren't so good.

For starters, there's the best villa pool I have ever experienced. It's 16m – plenty long enough for proper pre-breakfast lengths (and a good 9m longer than the Sicilian villa pool where I had to tether my ankles to the fence to get a decent swim) and with that vast Val d'Orcia backdrop for extra Instagram likes. Then there's the pergola: we ate every meal here, soaking up the views and frittering away long, Vino Nobile-soaked evenings watching fireflies fill the warm, cloudless nights.

Which partly explains why we never make it 50 minutes north to Siena. I say partly, because the whole

point of Tuscany and Umbria is that you don't need headliners like Siena. Wherever you go will have cobbles and churches and grannies hobbling down medieval alleys in their aprons. More importantly, it'll also have a piazza where you can eat *gelati* while watching the world go by.

So that's what we do. We swim, we read, we have lunch in the garden, then we go for ice cream in towns that no one's heard of – Sarteano, Cetona, Chianciano – but which all make us wonder why the hell we live in Britain.

On our last day, the grandparents offer to take us out to lunch. 'Does it have a pool?' asks the eight-year-old. 'Is there somewhere we can play football while we wait for our food?' asks the 10-year-old. 'I'd probably rather just hang at the villa,' says the 12-year-old. I know exactly how he feels.

For a selection of self-catering options, see overleaf.

Get me there: Invitation to Tuscany (020 8108 2432, invitationtotuscany.com) has 150 handpicked properties, all visited by locally raised owner Dan Wrightson and his Italian team. A week at Casa del Pastore starts at £2,550 per week (sleeping eight). The nearest airport is Perugia (see Factfile on page 78).



Dream day trip:

THE HIKE
The Apuan Alps may be known for marble, but they're also home to Tuscany's best hike, a five-hour loop on a well-marked footpath (CIA No. 6) around Monte Forato from Fornovolasco (see Ring of Monte Forato at turismo.intoscana.it). Via the Tana Che Urla cave (listen for the underground river – people used to think it was the roar from hell), you'll reach a spectacular stone arch near the 1,230m-high summit of Monte Forato.

La casa nostra

Bargain bolthole? Love-nest? Party pad? Luxury hideaway? One of these holiday homes has your name written *all over it*...



Get high: the pool at the sprawling estate of Murlo. Opposite, clockwise from top left, alfresco nibbles at traditional farmhouse Isola Rossa; stoneflagged Casa Fontefaggio for bargain-hunters; Villa Carosella is ideal for big groups; hillwalkers' bolthole Villa Dolcevento; Castel Monastero has a spa and Gordon Ramsay restaurant; Elton John's fave — Castello di Santa Eurasia



For families

● Run by two Dutch pals who loved Umbria so much they made it their home, **villainumbria.com** knows its villas inside out. Top pick for young families is Villa San Terenziano near Pantalla, which has a gated pool, toys, stair gates and a lovely lawn with a slide. *A week from £1,049; sleeps 8.*

● **Scottwilliams.co.uk** promises 'unique access to extraordinary houses'. That's underselling Villa Christina, the ultimate multi-family villa on the Tuscan/Umbrian border, with seven bedrooms in three buildings, plus a trampoline, tree house, cinema, games room, 15m pool, daily maid service and chef on request. *A week from £6,295; sleeps 12, plus 4 kids.*

● Need a nearby beach? **Invitationto.tuscany.com**'s tip from 200-odd properties is Casa dei Fichi, 15 minutes from the Gulf of Baratti shores (and Etruscan ruins), and 10 minutes' drive from the nearest *gelato* in pretty Campiglia Marittima. Huge footie lawn,

pizza oven, toys, pool — in short, family heaven. *A week from £1,869; sleeps 8.*

For couples

● **To-tuscany.com** has hundreds of villas, but Chianti was its first love, and it serves this area best. In the hills above Castellina in Chianti (40 minutes from Florence and Siena), Ginestra is a clever farmhouse conversion with mezzanine lounge, shaded terrace dining, a pool and alfresco sofas for snuggling in the sun. *A week from £1,267; sleeps 2.*

● The Maremma is Tuscany minus tour groups plus beaches, and it's a hub for **tuscanynowandmore.com**. Hidden away among pines and palm trees on the Monte Argentario peninsula, Isola Rossa is a traditional farmhouse with an open-plan interior splashed with colour. A path through orange groves leads past the pool to a secluded pebble beach. *A week from £1,285; sleeps 2.*

● Twenty minutes north of Perugia, **Murlo** (murlo.com) is a sprawling estate with 10 villas and apartments, a swanky



Dream day trip:
THE EASY BEACH
Castiglioncello pulled in movie starlets in the '60s; now the Livornian town is having a second moment, thanks to its sandy coves and rocky inlets an easy 10-minute walk from car park and train station. Bathe at the small public beach, or bag a spot at a private beach club (last season, Bagni Italia charged from £28 a day; bagnitalia.it). Take a stroll in the nearby pine woods, and grab snacks and gossip at Caffè Ginori (caffeginori.it).

golf course, and footpaths aplenty through ancient oak forests surrounding the castle. Tiglio is the couples' choice, with a private pool, whirlpool tub, and a bathtub-for-two gazing over Monte Tezio Valley. Don't fancy cooking? Request a chef, or dine in the estate's restaurant. *A week from £1,037; sleeps 2.*

For bargain-hunters

● **Jamesvillas.co.uk** offers oodles of choice and is king of the cheap 'n' cheerful. In Montefoscoli village near Pisa, Il Mulino is an open-plan, two-bed townhouse with a one-bed annexe by the pool — ideal for young families on holiday with grandparents. *A week from £589; sleeps 6.*

● Wedged between the Apennines and the Apuan Alps, mid-range Med specialist **vintagetraavel.co.uk**'s Villa Dolcevento is a beautiful hillwalker's hideaway in the forests above Lucca. It comes with lemon- and lavender-scented gardens, stone-flagged floors

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and antiques, and pool-views towards hilltop Lugliano. An added bonus is the company's flight-booking service (£30) to save you the tiresome online flight hunt. *A week from £1,264; sleeps 8.*

● Central and southern Italy expert **essentialitaly.co.uk** recommends Casa Fontefaggio as a great, affordable pad for two-family groups, with five bedrooms, four bathrooms, two lounges, and loads of nooks for the kids. It's 30 minutes from Perugia, Assisi and Gubbio, and a 15-minute stroll from Fratticiola Selvatica village's two bars, butcher and baker — if you can leave the panoramic pool and gardens. *A week from £1,620; sleeps 10.*

For luxury living

● 'Experiential' is a buzzword at **akvillas.com**: properties such as La Blanche are picked for their X factor, not just their look. Built by an architect couple, the striking, minimalist villa gazes down over Lucca like a glass-and-marble Bond villain's lair. It has a

massive (26m) horizon pool. Modern art abounds and a hydraulic roof retracts to let in thyme-scented breezes. *A week from £13,187; sleeps 10.*

● Twenty minutes from Siena, Villa Lavanda is a stylish 17th-century farmhouse in the grounds of **Castel Monastero** (castelmonastero.com), a medieval hilltop hamlet turned luxury hotel — so you can still use the spa, three pools, tennis courts and Gordon Ramsay restaurant, and ask them to arrange hot-air ballooning, wine-tasting and cooking classes on request. *A week from £7,700; sleeps 7.*

● **Avenueproperty.com** is your go-to for pricey A-lister crashpads. Elton John's fave is Castello di Santa Eurasia, a 12th-century castle perched high above the Tiber valley on the Tuscan/Umbrian border, with a blend of modern and medieval: Renaissance tapestries, vast four-posters, frescoes and velvet drapes, but also treatment rooms, a gym, maid service, butler and chef. *A week from £20,266; sleeps 16.*

For big groups

● **Oliverstravels.com** delivers quirky properties that don't cost the earth. Villa Carosella in southern Tuscany is 7km from the hilltop town of Radicofani, and comes with eight en-suite bedrooms plus a home theatre, sauna, tennis court and poolside sofas with views over Val d'Orcia. *A week from £8,022; sleeps 17.*

● Putting you directly in touch with owners, **homeaway.co.uk** has some well-priced crackers in Umbria, such as San Martino (property 1341874). Marooned on the shores of Lake Corbara, this 18th-century villa with cinema and 20m pool is a great base for Orvieto and Todi if lakeside lolling ever palls. *A week from £5,000; sleeps 19.*

● More village than villa, Borgo Bastia Creti is the pick of the party pads from Med veterans **cvvillas.com**. The Borgo, near Umbertide, has five villas in magnificent gardens, with pool, tennis court, daily maid service and a lounge-cum-dining 'club' in a converted chapel. *A week from £9,473; sleeps 26.*



Dream day trip:
THE CAMPARI SPRITZ STOP
Let's be honest, any snifter, any piazza will do, but Bar Ucci (www.bar-ucci.it/barucci.php), in the hilltop hamlet of Volpaia, takes a lot of beating. Terracotta roof tiles darken in the sinking sun, the bar's dogs Ombr and Pallina court cuddles, bubbly owner Paola talks you into one too many refills as the village kids play catch on the cobbled square — with luck you'll make it to dinner at La Bottega (see page 66), Paola's sister's nearby restaurant.