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Living amid the art and evocative landscapes of Tuscany

By: RALPH COLLIER , Main Line Times

There are two Americas. There is the America that spends its vacations in hotel rooms, large or more modest, and there is the America that prefers to stay in furnished apartments or villas in areas far from home. The more sophisticated traveler opts for more unusual destinations around the world. This year, cancel that hotel reservation and rent a villa in Italy's Tuscany region. Villas have achieved a degree of cachet over the years. Daily itineraries, if you are not in the mood to lie back and relax in your villa's garden, include shopping for Italian fashions (there are countless discount outlets), visiting vineyards and wineries and enjoying al fresco lakeside dining.

Key to contacting villa owners is to talk to qualified local representatives. For instance, on the Main Line, there's Doorways, Ltd. Villa Vacations and its specialist, Kit Burns, who has an encyclopedic knowledge about villas, castles and if you so desire, cottages, too. What's more, she elaborates about Tuscany's evocative landscape. Hill towns gaze across the countryside from on high, many encircled by Etruscan walls and slender cypress trees. Handsome palaces testify to the region's wealth, and medieval towns indicate a longstanding tradition of democracy and self-government.

There are also romantic hideaways overlooking the Mediterranean, Shangri-Las to nip off to for time to be alone together, watching sandpipers at sunset, munching freshly picked fruit, sipping mulled cider or local wine, sipping cappuccino on your patio and listening to Beethoven or Puccini under the stars. Tuscany's appeal is for the amorous and sensitive couple as well as for larger groups and reunions. Hideaways have splendidly equipped kitchens, swimming pools and gardens bound to delight children. Burns' staff has explored the back streets and byways of nearby towns and cities, enabling them to recommend the better chef-owned restaurants, village bakeries and open air markets and where to find the local color and charm that most casual visitors miss in Italy, France and Spain. It is an ideal opportunity to "live as the locals do" and enjoy the freedom to choose where to go and what to see at your own pace. Doorways' multilingual staff has visited the many properties they represent and provide in-depth knowledge of city flats, beach houses and farmhouses, as well.

Burns also recommends Spain's Catalonia as an economical alternative and predicts that it will soon be discovered by the American traveler, as Tuscany was 20 years ago. It offers a turquoise sea, along with friendly locals, world recognized wines and gardens resembling those in Tuscany, and there are unique biking trails frequented by Lance Armstrong.

Americans still use travel as a way to shed the familiar constraints of their culture and place and to act out experimental roles, some to measure themselves against foreign customs and values, others to seek aesthetic and spiritual experiences.

Tuscan cities like Florence, Pisa and Siena, along with smaller towns such as Lucca, Cortona and Arezzo, are desirable destinations, if only to see some of Italy's artistic treasures and sit at the heart of the nation's glorious pastoral countryside. We will drink to that.

For more information, please call Doorways, LTd. at 1-800-261-4460 or visit www.villavacations.com.



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Sleeps a total of 17+1 in 3 apartments

Ralph Collier is a member of the Society of American Travel Writers, the International Food, Wine, and Travel Writers Association, and the International Motor Press Association. His syndicated programs are heard on 32 radio stations. Locally, he can be heard Monday through Friday at 10 a.m. on WRTI 90.1 FM.