

*VILLA VACATIONS: MARKET BOOMING AS HOTEL PRICES CLIMB AND TRAVELLERS CRAVE LOCAL CONNECTION*

## Your own castle under the Umbrian sun

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April 28, 2007

Every couple of years since 1998, Peter and Marie Webb of Burlington, Ont., have got together with 10 or 12 friends to rent a villa in Europe. They have stayed in England, Italy's Umbria region and Dordogne in France. This year, the group is renting a historic Landmark Trust property in Scotland.

With hotel rates in most European cities starting at more than \$220 for a basic room, the group rental in Scotland will mean a substantial saving. Their share of the cost for seven nights in a large historic home with spacious common rooms and a fully equipped kitchen will be \$700, less than half what they would spend for the same number of nights in a good Edinburgh or Glasgow hotel.

"We also save quite a bit on food," Peter said. "You're not eating out. We buy the food locally and take turns cooking meals. That becomes part of the enjoyment too."

Soaring hotel prices, combined with a growing desire among travellers to more fully experience a destination, have led to a booming market in villa rentals.

"Once people finally try a rental-villa holiday, they usually enjoy it so much that they return to the experience regularly," said Martha

Tamblyn, co-owner with her husband, Gordon, of Toronto-based Country Roads Vacation Rentals.

"They have none of the restrictions you find in hotels. More importantly, they have a more intimate access to the local community. They're perfect for family reunions and groups of friends."

Country Roads has access to about 6,000 properties spread across Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Britain and Ireland. Properties and prices can range from \$950 for a week in June in a one-bedroom home in Tuscany to \$35,000 for the same week in a French mansion that sleeps 18 and comes with maids and cooks.

Prices rise in the peak vacation seasons and with luxuries such as concierge services, private pools and on-site staff.

There's no doubt that a villa or house stay can be cheaper than a hotel, especially if you travel as a group, she said, but the real advantage is the space you get and the chance to interact with the locals.

"The local baker, butcher and café owners get to know you and the lady at the local market will remember what kind of tomatoes you like."

### **Booking with a rental agency**

Using rental agencies may mean paying a premium of 5 to 20 per cent when renting villas, but the reward is more quality control and personalized service.

### **Country Roads Vacation Rentals**

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