

IN THE KNOW



HOMEBASE ABROAD LTD.

Homebase Abroad in Italy offers this rental: Via dei Prefetti, a four-bedroom villa in Rome's historic center.

Villas made for group vacations

By Irene S. Levine
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People travel not only to get away but also to get together. As a result, villa rentals are increasingly popular choices.

"In the US and Europe, villa rentals are growing twice as rapidly as the upscale hotel and resort business," says Ben Addoms, founder and chief marketing officer of the Quintess Collection, a destination club that recently acquired Time & Place, a luxury home and villa rental company.

Compared with booking multiple rooms at a hotel or resort, the cost, convenience, and luxury of a villa rental is often appealing to groups. If you are planning a group getaway, here are some things you should know:

What is a villa? Originally used to describe upscale country estates in Europe, there is no industry-wide standard for the term "villa." It refers to a broad range of private homes from condo apartments to sprawling residential properties, ranging from as little as \$1,500 a week to as much as thousands of dollars a night. "It is a fairly elastic marketing term," says Addoms.

What are the major advantages of villa rentals? Villas are private spaces rather than public ones. Your clan won't have to gather in a lobby, lounge, or restaurant. "In a villa, you can have cereal for breakfast in your pajamas with the kids," Addoms says.

"Guests value the intimacy and homelike experience of rentals," says Douglas Quinby of PhocusWright, a travel industry research firm. You can cook in your own kitchen — or have your meals prepared by a chef — and can have access to a washer and dryer.

Why do some groups prefer hotels? When groups opt for hotel or resort stays, they desire the services and amenities typically associated with these properties (e.g., daily maid

service, concierge services, 24/7 check-in, and room service). To compete, vacation rental management companies are increasingly offering "hotel-like" draws such as maid and concierge services, and keyless entry, says Quinby.

How do staffing levels vary among villas? Some are fully staffed with in-house chefs, butlers, and housekeepers, with the costs included in the nightly rental rate, says Julie Byrd, vice president of sales for CaboVillas.com. But Byrd cautions: Never assume that staffing is included.

What impact has technology had on villa rentals? The Internet has made it easier for consumers to research, find, and book rentals online. "Vacation rental management companies as well as websites that allow individual owners to list properties are now offering online booking and payment systems to make booking a rental more like booking a hotel," says Quinby.

How can travelers find the right villa? When choosing a villa, the individual or group renting the property has to consider the number of bedrooms needed, destination and/or location, and available amenities and services, says Byrd. "It's helpful to distinguish the 'must-haves' from things that are negotiable," says Byrd. "Price is always a factor, so setting a budget is an important starting point."

Using a rental specialist to do the footwork can help. "While a property may seem like a good fit online, an expert can offer the insider low-down, explaining both features and quirks of a property and location," says Byrd. They can also speak about other offerings in the area. "A company is making a promise of service quality and support, and hopes to do business with you again," adds Addoms.

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