

MY VILLA HAS A...

...treehouse, an inside-outside pool, two nannies, a yogi, an outdoor cinema, an à la carte restaurant, a whole village to yourself. It is amazing what can be yours if you know where to look, says PAUL CROUGHTON

So, you're renting a villa this year, are you? Sounds lovely, with its own pool, a barbecue and nice white walls. But let's be honest, it's not really going to spark envious looks at the supermarket, now is it? What you want is a villa with the X factor, a holiday home with an add-on. So here are our favourite rental properties around the world that come with added envy, guaranteed. Make sure you take plenty of pictures...

Prices are for a week's rental, based on full occupancy. Flights are not included, unless stated, in which case they are from London.

FULL-SIZE ANTIQUE SNOOKER TABLE

Château Bernede, Gers — sleeps 12

Set in 120 acres of private lawns, gardens and forest, this chateau in the foothills of the Pyrenees drips with Jeeves-and-Wooster charm. It has two games rooms, one with table tennis, the other with a full-size antique snooker table, while in the grounds outside are a badminton court and a trampoline. Once your energy has been expended, you can gather around the grand piano in the formal salon for a sing-song before dinner.

The damage From £3,935, with The Gascony Secret (www.gascony-secret.com). Pau is 30 miles away; fly there with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, www.ryanair.com).

INSIDE-OUTSIDE SWIMMING POOL

Zouzouni Villa, Cephalonia — sleeps 2

How about a modern but romantic hideaway, based around an infinity pool that curves round the building, then invites itself inside, right up to your floor-to-ceiling glass bedroom door? Which means you can rise from your slumber and slide into the pristine water in one elegant splash. The slick, minimalist design gives a decadent sense of being the only guests in a brand-new boutique hotel — which would make us immediately want to run down the corridor naked. That's probably just us. Though, as it's just the two of you...

The damage From £2,000 in May to £3,000 in August, including return flights, transfers and seven days' AWD hire, with Exclusive Escapes (020 8605 3500, www.exclusiveescapes.co.uk).

OBSERVATORY

Villa Ferraia, Tuscany — sleeps 28

Ever sat outside at night, gazing up into the ink-black beyond, wishing you could get that bit closer to the diamonds that glint there? Well, on the ridiculous inventory of extras at the Villa Ferraia, near Monticiano, is an observatory with telescope. Not only that, the Astronomical Society of Siena will happily pop over and work the thing for you, giving you a private masterclass in all things Patrick Moore. Not keen on stargazing? Suit yourself. Fishing, trout-fishing and hydro-massage are also on offer. And there's a chef, who will serve you in the main dining hall (yes, hall). Siena is 20 minutes' drive to the north, though, frankly, why you would want to leave the grounds is beyond me.

The damage From £13,057 in April to £17,100 in August, with To Tuscany (www.to-tuscany.co.uk). Monticiano is 70 miles from Florence; fly there with Meridiana (0870 224 3711, www.meridiana.it).

SPA

Palazzo Santa Croce, Amalfi — sleeps 8

Tragically, you will have to make do with just the five levels of Santa Croce, but, from top to bottom, it does its best to take your mind off your hardship. The rooftop garden, with citrus and fig trees, and a shaded gazebo, will provide relief for the claustrophobic; the baroque bedrooms, with their paneled, frescoed ceilings and outside mirrors, will ease your suffering slightly; but if it all gets too much, just trip down to the spa. Sorry, did I say spa? I meant pampering palace, with heated pool, fountains, lumbar and cervical massage jets (don't ask), Turkish bath, sauna, massage room and relaxation lounge with plasma telly. Picasso and Steinbeck slumped it here, and survived the experience.

The damage From £7,500 in March to £14,000 in July, with The Villa Book (020 7873 2111, www.thevillabook.com). Naples is 50 miles away; fly there with Thomsonfly (www.thomsonfly.com) or EasyJet (www.easyjet.com).

PRIVATE RESTAURANT

Russian Amethyst Villa, Shoal Bay West, Anguilla — sleeps 10

Hard to know where to begin here. Let's start with the butler, who is on hand, no requirement too small. Then there's the barman, with whom you will be best of friends by the end of day one, the masseuse and the housekeeper. There is even a pianist, who will do Chopsticks while you're getting dressed. Oh, I forgot, a private chef, but — a great insult, this — you might forget about him, as the Altamer restaurant, which specialises in French and Caribbean cuisine, is right there, just for villa guests. Embarrassing, really, isn't it? **The damage** From £15,278 in April to £21,289 in March, through Wimco (0870 850 1144, www.wimco.com). Flights to Anguilla start at £640, with American Airlines (020 7365 0777, www.americanairlines.co.uk), via New York and Puerto Rico. Or fly American to St Martin via New York (from £570) and take a 20-minute ferry.

TROUT-FISHING LAKE

Merlin Cottage, Beacon Hill Farm, Northumberland — sleeps 4

Merlin's Lake, on Beacon Hill Farm, is stocked annually with rainbow trout, and guests can set up a rod and dip away. For those who actually want to catch something, there's a resident fishing coach who can help with your cast. Use of the spa facilities, pool, tennis court and gym are all included in the price, and there's clay-pigeon shooting and quad-biking nearby. **The damage** From £435 in March to £1,255 in August. Call 01670 780900 or visit www.beaconhill.co.uk.

CINEMA

Villa Mirabel, Tarn-et-Garonne — sleeps 2

The great thing about luxury is not having to share it with the riffraff. Want to watch a film, but not to listen to other people's popcorn? No problem, as this converted barn and country house in Lauzerte comes with its own cinema, 13ft screen and DVD library. When you drag yourself outside, there's also a 30ft pool, and the bedroom has views over the orchards. The nearby villages of Moissac and Lauzerte hold regular fairs, *boiles* competitions, farmers' markets and music festivals. **The damage** From £500 in March to £700 in August, through Holiday Lets (01234 756945, www.holidaylets.net). Toulouse is 34 miles away; airlines that fly there include Jet2 (0871 226 1737, www.jet2.com) and EasyJet (www.easyjet.com).

WINDMILL

La Badelle Moulin, Provence — sleeps 6

This 18th-century windmill was still revolving until the 1920s, but has now been converted into a quaint villa. Surrounded by vineyards, with its own pool, it isn't lavish accommodation, but its charm and views make up for the lack of an ensuite spa or boat-driving butler. Tennis courts and the ancient but lovely hilltop village of Goult are both a few minutes away.

The damage From £840 in March to £1,995 in August, with Abercrombie & Kent (0845 070 0618, www.abercrombiekent.co.uk). Avignon is 25 miles away; fly there with Jet2 (www.jet2.com) or Flybe (0871 700 2000, www.flybe.com).

TWO NANNIES

Quinta do Calma, Algarve — sleeps 12

There is plenty to keep you quiet here — solar-heated swimming pool, Moroccan loggia relaxation area — but it's not always easy to get the kids to see things in equally chilled terms, which is where the two fully qualified nannies who come with the property prove invaluable. They double up as activity organisers if required, arranging outings and competitions for older kids.

The damage From £8,995 in March to £13,035 in August, based on six adults and six children, including chef, host, nannies and all meals, with Scott Dunn (020 8682 5040, www.scottdunn.com). Faro is 15 miles away; fly there with BMI Baby (0871 224 0224, www.bmibaby.com) or Flythomascook (www.flythomascook.com).

TREEHOUSE

Perché dans le Perche, Normandy — sleeps 5

Not so much a villa, this one, as a treehouse that thinks it's a villa. Slap-bang in the heart of the Parc Naturel Régional du

Perche, in southern Normandy, Perché is a spit-level homestead halfway up a sweet chestnut tree that graciously wraps its branches round the property. With two bedrooms, a shower, internet access and panoramic views of the French countryside from the terrace, it's ideal for a family (with up to three kids), and breakfast is thrown in. Oh, and it's no smoking, obviously.

The damage From £589 for two people, rising to £889 for five people, year-round, with Holiday Lettings (01865 312000, www.holidaylettings.co.uk). Tours is 80 miles away; fly there with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, www.ryanair.com).

VILLAGE

Castelnau des Fleumarcon, Gascony — sleeps 69

Perfect for weddings — or just for one hell of a knees-up — this extraordinary village is available for hire (it can be split into three if you don't know 68 people). There are 12 houses, sleeping between two and nine, and each room has its own feel: some have alcove beds heated with a brass warmer in winter; others are suites with sitting rooms; more have ensuite with huge showers; others still have cots and smaller beds for kids. The village is also home to a church, a converted stable that serves as a reception room, a library, plenty of pianos, a tennis court and a heated pool. And there's a professional wedding planner on tap.

The damage £47,460 for the entire village (minimum stay two nights), with Big Domain (01326 240028, www.thebigdomain.com). The village can be split into three for smaller groups, on a pro rata basis. Carcassonne is 40 miles away; fly there with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, www.ryanair.com).

ALFRESCO ROLL-TOP BATH

Magic Cottage, Takou River, North Island, New Zealand — sleeps 2

Boring, aren't they, baths? Once your arms get tired and you've dipped the bottom of the newspaper into the bubbles for the fourth time, you're stuck there, pruning, staring at the crack in the ceiling and listening to the gurgle of the overflow. Plunge yourself instead into the antique beauty on the deck of the ambitiously named Magic Cottage. Hidden from view, you can stare at your ceiling of stars, listen to the burble of the river as it runs past your feet and contemplate your luxury surroundings, your super-king-size bed, your solar-powered lighting, your own private swimming hole, your private river frontage, your canoes bobbing in front of you, your dinner sizzling on the barbe. There are a few more romantic spots in New Zealand, but they don't come with bubble bath.

The damage £534 per night; call 00 64 9407 8065 or visit www.takouriver.com. Auckland is a 3½hr drive away, Kerikeri 25min. Air New Zealand (www.airnewzealand.co.uk) flies to Auckland, via LA, from £640, and Kerikeri, via LA and Auckland, from £720.

SKIPPED MOTOR CRUISER

Albanta Island Retreat, Sovalye, Turkey — sleeps 6

This spectacular four-storey house is surrounded on three sides water, which is why having your own boat is a fine idea. The 36ft-long beauty will ferry you around the islands, and take you on a day-long cruise to explore the Gulf of Fethiye and the Gökcek islands. Back on dry land, you will find terrace decks galore, glass walls and beautiful waterfront views everywhere you look. There is also a bath with sea view, in case you didn't get enough of the water on your private beach.

The damage From £4,398 in May to £7,902 in July, including flights, transfers and two days' car hire, with Exclusive Escapes (020 8605 3500, www.exclusiveescapes.co.uk).

ANDALUSIAN STUD FARM

Villa Barco, Umbria — sleeps 8

Guests at this secluded property on the sprawling Castello di Reschio estate have access to a stable of purebred horses, and the resident groomers and guides will take you out on the trails in the surrounding hills. The estate also has a five-star concierge service — which will take care of food — drivers and several maids, and cookery courses at the local restaurant can be arranged. On site are mountain-bike trails, a tennis court and a floodlit Astroturf pitch, not to mention the usual boring