



HOME AWAY FROM HOME

In search of a more personalised experience, travellers are turning to private villa rentals and high-end house swaps

NOT TOO LONG AGO, BIG CHAIN HOTELS that offered comfort and familiarity were the go-to choices for frequent travellers. But now the discerning among them are looking for a more unusual experience, one that affords them privacy, space and a personalised stay. Once the provenance of celebrities and millionaire tycoons, private villa rentals have become relatively more affordable and are increasingly becoming savvy vacationers' temporary residence of choice – whether it's a character-filled 17th-century Sicilian farmhouse with acres of land and a personal chef on hand or a six-bedroom villa on a secluded beach in the Caribbean with a private infinity pool and helipad. "Today's travellers are looking for a place to truly relax among friends and family in a world of their own, without having to make reservations in the restaurant or battle with other guests for the best sun loungers," explains Giles Adam, Partner and President of 3rd Home (3rdhome.com), which offers luxury second home swaps. "Lots of our homes and villas come with excellent staff, offering the services and amenities of a five-star hotel."

While concierge services are standard at high-end hotels, rental companies are now taking it a step further, offering the services of in-the-know locals as tour guides, which gives guests access to things they wouldn't be able to do as regular tourists. "Our members love being able to interact with the home's owner to discover their favourite restaurants, things to do and places to visit," adds Adam. "Some owners have even signed guests into their private clubs or lent them their boat for the duration of the stay."

In addition to more space and privacy, many travellers find renting a property a more cost-effective option, especially when staying for a week or more or travelling in a big group. "Private rentals offer an experience that is tailor-made around you with no hidden costs," says Katherine Rosc, Head of Mediterranean Product at luxury villa rental experts Scott Dunn (scottdunn.com). "Everything is included, so there are no unexpected extras and you're able to have everyone under the same roof, not spread around a resort."

It's also, unsurprisingly, a popular choice for family vacations. "Instead of being forced to ▶

WHERE to STAY

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go out to a restaurant at 5.30pm so that the baby can get home for bedtime, families and friends can enjoy a decadent meal prepared by a private chef in their residence while the children sleep peacefully upstairs," says Cathy Ross, COO of Exclusive Resorts (exclusiveresorts.com).

Traditional hotels still dominate in terms of annual revenue, but the rental market is expected to gain some ground in 2014 with 89 per cent of those who have experienced holiday rentals saying they would do so again and 87 per cent saying they would recommend it to a friend or relative, according to Radius Global Market Research. In response, hotels are having to step up their game with more bespoke, personalised services. Brands such as Alila Hotels & Resorts (alilahotels.com), Aleenta (aleenta.com) and Aman Resorts (amanresorts.com) are launching villa-only properties, while exclusive-use retreats by Singita (singita.com) and boutique properties with fewer rooms like those offered by Mr & Mrs Smith (mrandmrs-smith.com) are becoming more sought-after. Properties are also tapping into the demand for local knowledge: Four Seasons (fourseasons.com) launched an online trip-planning service Pin.Pack.Go, which connects guests with its local experts through Pinterest boards, and the Borgo Egnazia resort in Puglia, Italy, is connecting guests to local "concierges" (*for more, see Word of Mouth, p 34*).

While the trend of villa rental companies hasn't crept quite so boldly on to Middle Eastern shores as yet, some of the larger hotel chains are introducing serviced apartments and residences, giving guests the option of the space and privacy they crave, while also having access to the properties' five-star amenities and service. Leading the way are Sofitel The Palm (sofitel.com) in Dubai and Dusit Thani Abu Dhabi (dusit.com), Dubai's Jumeirah Living World Trade Centre Residence (jumeirah.com) offers serviced apartments with a 24-hour lifestyle team plus access to Jumeirah's private beaches and free shuttle service, and the Hilton Doha The Pearl Residences in Qatar (hilton.com) is in the works, with a mix of high-end serviced apartments, penthouses and townhouses. **CNT**





LIVE LIKE A LOCAL

Not sure where to start? Here's what you need to know

VILLAS

A popular option for those who want the space that not even the largest hotel suites can offer along with home comforts like your own kitchen and private pool. Scott Dunn specialises in villas in Mallorca and the south of France with a dedicated chef who will tailor meals to your taste using fresh local ingredients, a villa host to cater to every whim, as well as a qualified nanny and activity specialist. Abercrombie & Kent chalets in the Alps and restored farmhouses in the Italian countryside, Spain, France, Greece and the UK. Guests benefit from an optional villa host and local guide. Luxury Retreats (luxuryretreats.com), The Villa Experience (thevillaexperience.net), Carpe Diem Luxury Travel (carpediemtravel.co.uk) and Quintessentially Villas (quintessentiallyvillas.com) are also worth bookmarking for exclusive rentals, while HomeAway recently introduced a new site focused on luxury villas (luxury.homeaway.com).

APARTMENTS

A penthouse in Sydney, brownstone in New York or a loft in Paris is another option for those looking to be on the doorstep of a city's top attractions while still having their own space to retreat to. One Fine Stay (onefinestay.com) bills itself as the "unhotel" with a curated selection of luxury apartments, which come with an iPhone full of tips on where to shop, eat, drink and live like a local, plus recommendations from the com) offers luxury apartments in France with a private greeter, bottle of grape and flowers on arrival, 24/7 customer line, restaurant recommendations, maid service and add-ons such as spa treatments and a private driver. Other sites offering apartment rentals around the world with five-star extras include Vive Unique (viveunique.com) and Villas & Apartments Abroad (vaanyc.com), while Airbnb (airbnb.com), which started as a couch-surfing site, now lists more luxurious residences across the globe and trains hosts in the art of hospitality.

HOME SWAPS

If you own a luxury second home but are bored of visiting the same destination every time you want to get away, a house swap provides a home away from home anywhere in the world. 3rd Home is a high-end exchange club where second-home owners donate a number of weeks at their property in exchange for "key" credits that can be used to rent other people's holiday homes. The average value of properties on the site is on the value of your second home as well as the season offered. While there is an initiation fee to join and an exchange fee, members don't pay anything for the rental. Love Home Swap (lovehomeswap.com) has over 50,000 properties worldwide and members are free to contact each other to arrange a direct exchange for a small monthly fee. IVHE (ivhe.com) allows second-home owners to swap directly with another member or earn credits toward a future rental, which includes luxury villas, city condos, ski chalets, safari game lodges and even yachts.