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La casa nostra

Bargain bolthole? Love-nest? Party pad? Luxury hideaway?
 One of these holiday homes has your name written *all over it*...



Get high: the pool at the sprawling estate of Murlo. Opposite, clockwise from top left, alfresco nibbles at traditional farmhouse Isola Rossa; stoneflagged Casa Fontefaggio for bargain-hunters;

Villa Carosella is ideal for big groups; hillwalkers' bolthole Villa Dolcevento; Castel Monastero has a spa and Gordon Ramsay restaurant; Elton John's fave — Castello di Santa Eurasia

For families

- Run by two Dutch pals who loved Umbria so much they made it their home, villainumbria.com knows its villas inside out. Top pick for young families is Villa San Terenziano near Pantalla, which has a gated pool, toys, stair gates and a lovely lawn with a slide. *A week from £1,049; sleeps 8.*
- Scottwilliams.co.uk promises 'unique access to extraordinary houses'. That's underselling Villa Christina, the ultimate multi-family villa on the Tuscan/Umbrian border, with seven bedrooms in three buildings, plus a trampoline, tree house, cinema, games room, 15m pool, daily maid service and chef on request. *A week from £6,295; sleeps 12, plus 4 kids.*
- Need a nearby beach? InvitationtoTuscany.com's tip from 200-odd properties is Casa dei Fichi, 15 minutes from the Gulf of Baratti shores (and Etruscan ruins), and 10 minutes' drive from the nearest *gelato* in pretty Campiglia Marittima. Huge footie lawn,

pizza oven, toys, pool — in short, family heaven. *A week from £1,869; sleeps 8.*

For couples

- To-tuscany.com has hundreds of villas, but Chianti was its first love, and it serves this area best. In the hills above Castellina in Chianti (40 minutes from Florence and Siena), Ginestra is a clever farmhouse conversion with mezzanine lounge, shaded terrace dining, a pool and alfresco sofas for snuggling in the sun. *A week from £1,267; sleeps 2.*
- The Maremma is Tuscany minus tour groups plus beaches, and it's a hub for tuscanynowandmore.com. Hidden away among pines and palm trees on the Monte Argentario peninsula, Isola Rossa is a traditional farmhouse with an open-plan interior splashed with colour. A path through orange groves leads past the pool to a secluded pebble beach. *A week from £1,285; sleeps 2.*
- Twenty minutes north of Perugia, **Murlo** (murlo.com) is a sprawling estate with 10 villas and apartments, a swanky



Dream day trip:

THE EASY BEACH

Castiglioncello pulled in movie starlets in the '60s; now the Livornian town is having a second moment, thanks to its sandy coves and rocky inlets an easy 10-minute walk from car park and train station. Bathe at the small public beach, or bag a spot at a private beach club (last season, Bagni Italia charged from £28 a day; bagnitalia.it). Take a stroll in the nearby pine woods, and grab snacks and gossip at Caffè Ginori (caffeginori.it).

golf course, and footpaths aplenty through ancient oak forests surrounding the castle. Tiglio is the couples' choice, with a private pool, whirlpool tub, and a bathtub-for-two gazing over Monte Tezio Valley. Don't fancy cooking? Request a chef, or dine in the estate's restaurant. *A week from £1,037; sleeps 2.*

For bargain-hunters

- Jamesvillas.co.uk offers oodles of choice and is king of the cheap 'n' cheerful. In Montefoscoli village near Pisa, Il Mulino is an open-plan, two-bed townhouse with a one-bed annexe by the pool — ideal for young families on holiday with grandparents. *A week from £589; sleeps 6.*
- Wedged between the Apennines and the Apuan Alps, mid-range Med specialist vintagetravel.co.uk's Villa Dolcevento is a beautiful hillwalker's hideaway in the forests above Lucca. It comes with lemon- and lavender-scented gardens, stone-flagged floors

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and antiques, and pool-views towards hilltop Lugliano. An added bonus is the company's flight-booking service (£30) to save you the tiresome online flight hunt. *A week from £1,264; sleeps 8.*

● Central and southern Italy expert essentialitaly.co.uk recommends Casa Fontefaggio as a great, affordable pad for two-family groups, with five bedrooms, four bathrooms, two lounges, and loads of nooks for the kids. It's 30 minutes from Perugia, Assisi and Gubbio, and a 15-minute stroll from Fratticiola Selvatica village's two bars, butcher and baker — if you can leave the panoramic pool and gardens. *A week from £1,620; sleeps 10.*

For luxury living

● 'Experiential' is a buzzword at akvillas.com: properties such as La Blanche are picked for their X factor, not just their look. Built by an architect couple, the striking, minimalist villa gazes down over Lucca like a glass-and-marble Bond villain's lair. It has a

massive (26m) horizon pool. Modern art abounds and a hydraulic roof retracts to let in thyme-scented breezes. *A week from £13,187; sleeps 10.*

● Twenty minutes from Siena, Villa Lavanda is a stylish 17th-century farmhouse in the grounds of **Castel Monastero** (castelmonastero.com), a medieval hilltop hamlet turned luxury hotel — so you can still use the spa, three pools, tennis courts and Gordon Ramsay restaurant, and ask them to arrange hot-air ballooning, wine-tasting and cooking classes on request. *A week from £7,700; sleeps 7.*

● Avenueproperty.com is your go-to for pricey A-lister crashpads. Elton John's fave is Castello di Santa Eurasia, a 12th-century castle perched high above the Tiber valley on the Tuscan/Umbrian border, with a blend of modern and medieval: Renaissance tapestries, vast four-posters, frescoes and velvet drapes, but also treatment rooms, a gym, maid service, butler and chef. *A week from £20,266; sleeps 16.*

For big groups

● Oliverstravels.com delivers quirky properties that don't cost the earth. Villa Carosella in southern Tuscany is 7km from the hilltop town of Radicofani, and comes with eight en-suite bedrooms plus a home theatre, sauna, tennis court and poolside sofas with views over Val d'Orcia. *A week from £8,022; sleeps 17.*

● Putting you directly in touch with owners, homeaway.co.uk has some well-priced crackers in Umbria, such as San Martino (property 1341874). Marooned on the shores of Lake Corbara, this 18th-century villa with cinema and 20m pool is a great base for Orvieto and Todi if lakeside lolling ever palls. *A week from £5,000; sleeps 19.*

● More village than villa, Borgo Bastia Creti is the pick of the party pads from Med veterans cvillas.com. The Borgo, near Umbertide, has five villas in magnificent gardens, with pool, tennis court, daily maid service and a lounge-cum-dining 'club' in a converted chapel. *A week from £9,473; sleeps 26.*



Dream day trip:

THE CAMPARI SPRITZ STOP

Let's be honest, any sniffer, any piazza will do, but Bar Ucci (www.bar-ucci.it/barucci.php), in the hilltop hamlet of Volpaia, takes a lot of beating. Terracotta roof tiles darken in the sinking sun, the bar's dogs Ombra and Pallina court cuddles, bubbly owner Paola talks you into one too many refills as the village kids play catch on the cobbled square — with luck you'll make it to dinner at La Bottega (see page 66), Paola's sister's nearby restaurant.