

## Ezzahra, Marrakech, Morocco

THE vibrant city of Marrakech is pretty perfect all year round. Last time, I stayed slap-bang in the middle; this year, I branched out to the Palmeraie, a 10-minute journey from the centre.

I'm not sure I can ever go back to Medina life—Ezzahra is, quite simply, heaven and I'm convinced that serviced villas are the way forward. They offer all of the luxury of a five-star hotel (there are 20 staff, including a butler and masseuses on tap), without having to share any of it with other guests.

Three sumptuous villas make up the estate (sleeping 26 in total) and the decor will have you yearning to buy up the entire *souk* and ship it home. Cooking is a sophisticated blend of authentic Moroccan cuisine and lighter, European flavours, but, remember, this is your own place, so you can request what you



would like, when you want it. Watermelon daiquiris appeared by the pool after our inclusive massage treatments, as if by magic. Later on in the evening, we enjoyed an alfresco dinner, bathed in candlelight. The villa has a car to whisk you off on tours of

the Medina and there's also riding and visits to the Atlas Mountains. *HL*  
From £18,270 for three nights, based on 14 people sharing, on an all-inclusive, fully serviced basis (00 212 6612 21714; [www.ezzahra-morocco.com](http://www.ezzahra-morocco.com))

# The perfect 10

Find your holiday home away from home with COUNTRY LIFE's choice of the top 10 villas in the world

## Gaelforce, Sydney, Australia

HERE really isn't another property quite like Gaelforce. Overlooking the shores of Pittwater, the original 1930s structure has been restored and extended by Francesco and Gael Bogleione.

It's no wonder that the interiors—clean and white, offset by bright, modern art and the earthy timber structure—are so beautiful. A coral-inspired bed occupies one room and another comes with a freestanding tub and floor-to-ceiling windows.

Outside, you'll find a wood-decked jetty, a boathouse (Mr Bogleione keeps his Riva inside) and a sunken pool, fringed by palms. *Contemporary Hotels* (00 61 2 9331 2881; [www.contemporary.hotels.com.au](http://www.contemporary.hotels.com.au)) offers seven nights from AU\$17,500 (about £9,870) based on 14 people sharing



Podere Celli, Tuscany, Italy

PODERE CELLI, a beautifully restored old stone farmhouse, 30 minutes outside Florence, exemplifies high culture.

The building was rescued from ruin by the current owners. Large, open, brick fireplaces, tiled floors and wooden-beamed ceilings have been saved. Replica frescoes now adorn the walls and spacious rooms (more than big enough to accommodate the villa's 16 guests, with a further 10 in the guesthouse) have been furnished with rustic-style furniture and floral-print fabrics, which stop it all feeling too barren. It's a stylistic triumph.

Outside, in the immaculately landscaped gardens, a huge travertine swimming pool looks out across undulating Chianti countryside. Thanks to its position at the end of a long, tree-lined driveway, which winds its way down from a hill ridge, the villa is neither too elevated and exposed nor too far down the valley and shaded.

The heart of Podere Celli is the pergola and climbing-rose-covered alfresco dining area.

At the front of the house, on a paved terrace, it's where we gathered each morning for breakfast and, at the end of another hard day by the pool, for supper. The most memorable was a traditional Tuscan feast—including stuffed and fried courgette flowers—produced by chef Leonardo. Alternatively, Italian villa specialist Tuscany Now & More can also organise a private chef for the duration of your holiday.

Leaving was difficult, but a few of us made the not-so-arduous journey to the nearby village of Barberino Val d'Elsa and surrounding vineyards. The promise of wine no doubt helped—most of them happily welcome visitors for tours and tastings.

On an unseasonably overcast day, we set out on a guided walk. We followed a section of the Via Francigena—an ancient, pilgrim route that once connected Canterbury to Rome—ending at the medieval hill town of San Gimignano. The town is in exceptional condition—the original 13th-century walls still stand and the 12th-century Duomo

di San Gimignano, where frescoes by Ghirlandaio illustrate both the Old and New Testaments, is well worth a visit.

Our guide, Carol, was raised in America, but moved back to her family's native Italy more than 20 years ago. Her love for the country was infectious and her knowledge invaluable. Halfway through the walk, she surprised us with a pre-arranged picnic, overlooking the vines. Legendary local Andrea had prepared local meats, cheeses and what he declared to be 'the world's best ricotta'. It was served in small glasses, drizzled with peppery olive oil. Much like Podere Celli, it surpassed expectations. *RP*

*Tuscany Now & More* (020-7684 8884; [www.tuscanynowandmore.com](http://www.tuscanynowandmore.com)) offers seven days at Villa Podere Celli from £8,647, based on 16 people sharing, in January/February 2019 on a self-catering basis (includes a maid). *Tuscany Now & More* features a range of properties across the region and Italy and can provide chefs, excursions and other services upon request.



## Sunrise House, Mustique, Caribbean

SUNRISE HOUSE comes with its very own white-sand beach. The main house and accompanying beachfront cottage are joined by an infinity pool and everything is sheltered from the outside world by large palms. Macaroni Beach and Pasture Bay are an easy walk or you can stay put and make the most of the private tennis court and home cinema. From £49,386 for seven nights, based on 10 people sharing (020-3773 9244; [www.cvvillas.com](http://www.cvvillas.com))



## Axnoller House, Dorset, England

FINDING complete seclusion in Britain, a long way from trains, planes, automobiles and prying eyes doesn't need to involve long treks to far-flung estates or Scottish islands. Closer to the heart of things, there is a handful of secluded estates with discreet gates that would be missed by all but the most beady-eyed. They might not be off-grid, but the peace and privacy gives them a feel that's almost otherworldly.

One of these is Axnoller, buried deep in rolling countryside that dips gently down

towards Dorset's Jurassic coast. At its heart is a handsome stone house and secondary accommodation across two additional houses that will accommodate parties of 34 guests.

With a spa, pool, stud and the opportunity for your stay to be fully catered, there are plenty of ways to spoil friends, family and wedding parties.

The interiors are formal, but intimate in the main house, but crisp, contemporary and supremely comfortable in Burggraaf and Voltaire, the two additional houses.

Although it's unlikely anyone would ever want to dip back into the real world, the pleasures of West Dorset—Beaminster, West Bay and Lyme Regis—are all within easy reach.

As a wedding venue, it is without parallel; Axnoller combines the effortless luxury of a five-star resort with the intimacy of a private home that couples can treat as their own. *GK*

For more information and prices, please telephone 01308 861744 or visit [www.axnoller.co.uk](http://www.axnoller.co.uk)

## The Chalet Saunton, Braunton, north Devon

FROM its elevated position high on the hillside overlooking the sweeping expanse of Saunton Sands, Chalet Saunton enjoys epic views of north Devon's rugged Atlantic coastline.

The three-mile-long golden sandy beach, which is so photogenic that Pink Floyd shot the cover of *A Momentary Lapse of Reason* there, has long drawn people to the area, especially as dogs are allowed to dip their paws in the waves year round and there's a surf school at the end of the footpath that leads direct from the Chalet, via a decked boardwalk, to the sea.

Given that Chalet Saunton's owner, Tim Fleming—who built this slate-coloured shrine to Minimalism and open-plan living on the site of his boyhood home in 2017—allows guests to bring their dogs and provides (warm) outdoor taps to wash off pooches and surfing gear, as well as a place to store boards and wetsuits, all seven apartments are ideal for those who love the outdoors.

With white-cotton bedlinen, pale-grey marble bathrooms, state-of-the-art appliances and striking artwork, including lots of moody black-and-white photographs, this 'apart-hotel' offers a contemporary take on traditional self-catering properties: no chintz or net curtains here.

You'll need a car, as the Chalet is three miles from Braunton and 20 minutes from Ilfracombe (home to Damien Hirst's sculpture *Verity*), where we enjoyed scallops, crab claws, a whole Lundy lobster and crunchy, goose-fat cooked chips.

However, apart from the huge, light-filled rooms and being able to contact the super-efficient housekeeper Lisa—who can arrange baby- and dog-sitting, as well as shopping—at any time of the day or night, the most captivating charm of this sleek



property is the Crittall French doors that afford a mesmerising window on a dramatic coastline that's just as beguiling on a dark, stormy night, when the roaring waves crash onto the shore, as it is on a bright, sparkly day, when the aquamarine sky almost merges with the silvery, shimmering sea. *PL*

From £350 per night for a three-bedroom apartment that sleeps six, on a self-catering basis, including a welcome hamper of local produce and ilapothecary products (01271 890514; [www.chaletsaunton.com](http://www.chaletsaunton.com))



## Villa Yeraki, Corfu, Greece

**V**ILLA YERAKI doesn't just sit on the north-east corner of Corfu, it clings to it, built into a vertiginous slope dropping down to the warm, blue Adriatic. Every element of the architecture works to underline the magic of this location—rooms point out to the sea and every outdoor seating area (there are at least half a dozen) is arranged to remind you why you came.

Modern planning rules mean that such a home couldn't exist today, but, thankfully, no such restrictions were in place when Yeraki was first erected in the 1960s on the outskirts of Kassiopi, in the very smartest corner of Corfu. In the early 1980s, it was

bought by Richard and Patricia Cookson, a husband-and-wife team. Their company, Corfu Villas, did a huge amount to fuel the island's tourist boom.

Then a near wreck, Yeraki has been transformed into a serene six-bedroom villa surrounded by olive trees and Mediterranean flora, with an infinity pool and its own jetty.

The bedrooms are split two each between the main house, pool house and a lower-level terrace. Easy chairs, hammocks and sun loungers dot the nooks, crannies and terraces all around the property. Adding to that sense of ease are Joanne and Eleanor, Yeraki's manager/in-house chef and house-

keeper respectively—their discreet presence means that you never have to lift a finger.

Today, the villa is managed by Nick Cookson, son of Mr Cookson and the sadly late Mrs Cookson, and let out via a new company, the Villa Collective. The company might have changed, but the clients haven't—as the guestbook testifies, many have been coming here on a regular basis for 30 years or more. It's absurdly easy to see why they keep coming back. *TK*

*The Villa Collective (020-3950 1588; [www.villacollective.com](http://www.villacollective.com)) offers seven nights at Villa Yeraki from €7,500, based on 12 people sharing*

## Eagles Nest, Bay of Islands, New Zealand

**F**IVE self-contained villas, set in tropical gardens, overlook Tapeka Point and the Bay of Islands. Outside, there's big-game fishing, sailing, diving and helicopter safaris on offer. Inside, you'll find contemporary and comfortable design. If en masse, plump for the Sacred Space Villa—four bedrooms and a jaw-dropping, two-storey glass-roofed living area. Couples should choose the First Light Temple Villa (*right*), a split-level, one-bedroom property, with ocean views from the glass-walled shower. *Turquoise Holidays (01494 678400; [enquiries@turquoiseholidays.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@turquoiseholidays.co.uk)) offers three nights in First Light Temple Villa from £995 per person*





## Villa Sola Cabiati, Lake Como, Italy

**S**ET on the shores of glamorous Lake Como, this pristinely preserved Baroque villa is picturesque enough to house a Disney princess—or you and 11 of your nearest and dearest.

Once the summer abode of the noble Serbelloni family, Villa Sola Cabiati features sweeping, swirling frescoes of Virgil's *Aeneid* in pretty pastel hues plus antique furniture, including a bed once slept in by Napoleon.

Although you can't sleep in M. Bonaparte's canopied bedstead, there are six

suites available, which are equally opulent and recently redecorated. Claw-foot tubs and vintage vanities sit resplendent in the accompanying bathrooms.

The 16th-century lakefront landmark also comes with a host of modern amenities. There's a 24-hour butler service, dedicated housekeepers and a personal chef who can organise anything from a candlelit dinner to a poolside barbeque in the manicured, camellia-scented gardens. Despite the architecture and artefacts, it's all rather comfortable.

Should you want to escape, there's a private dock and water limousines courtesy of the nearby Grand Hotel Tremezzo; the nearby town of Bellagio is a short cruise away. Alternatively, ask the chef to pack you a picnic and head to Isola Comacina, Lake Como's only island. *Nicole Trilivas Elegant resorts* (01244 897441; [www.elegantresorts.co.uk](http://www.elegantresorts.co.uk)) offers three nights at Villa Sola Cabiati from £18,220, based on 12 people sharing on an all-inclusive basis. Flights and transfers can be arranged at an additional cost.

## Pinkmead estate, near Cowes, Isle of Wight

**I**F it weren't for the fact that the place itself is so beautiful, I'd be tempted to say that getting to the Pinkmead estate was half the fun. Catch the Red Jet ferry to Cowes and, from there, a smaller boat, captained by Dave the boatman, to Pinkmead's private jetty. Only a delightful stroll separates you from the house, a 24-acre estate previously owned by Henry VIII and Oxford University. It's been in the O'Dell family for three generations.

The estate has only recently become available to hire, on an exclusive basis. There's a three-bedroom main house that's been beautifully furnished. Its crowning jewel is the huge garden room, complete with an electric baby-grand piano, and views across to the River Medina. A separate summer house, dubbed the Kitchen Garden, comprises a kitchen, dining area, cinema projector and a glass-walled bathroom, where you can soak in the tub while looking out for red squirrels playing on the grass. Finally, there's a boathouse, with canoes you can take out onto the water and a garage that's been converted into a private yoga studio and gym.



This is the spot for anyone wanting a sheltered, dog-friendly paradise. It was pretty unbeatable, even in bad weather—Biblical-style rain fell on our second day—and, after a morning splashing through the woods in wellies and raincoats, our group was only too glad to snuggle up in front of the log burner, play board games and mix the odd drink using Pinkmead's very own gin. *TK Mulberry Cottages* (01227 464958; [www.mulberrycottages.com](http://www.mulberrycottages.com)) offer three nights from £1,600 or seven nights from £2,700