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Italian property a sparkling example of HomeAway's vacation rental offerings

BY CATHY DONALDSON
TIMES & TRANSCRIPT STAFF

Imagine driving along a twisty, country road, making a sharp turn up a gravel driveway and arriving at your destination — a 900-year-old stone farmhouse with such incredible vistas that you're left completely awestruck.

Welcome to Tuscany!

Before a recent visit, I'd read books and seen movies about this central region of Italy. It seemed a warm, dreamy place where olives and grapes flourished happily, where sunflowers appeared to smile as they grew to tremendous heights and where lines of slender Cyprus trees guarded the horizon next to ancient castles.

Earlier this year — inspired by these images — I suggested to my husband, two daughters and parents that we spend time in the Tuscan countryside during a trip to Europe in June. It seemed the right thing to do since we knew we'd need down time after a week of hectic sightseeing in Paris and Rome.

The clan agreed and, with months to go before

the summer adventure, we began to search for a vacation rental property (one with a pool, since the temps in Tuscany would be toasty.)

To make our job easier, we explored HomeAway.com, whose Texas-based parent company HomeAway, Inc. is considered the world leader in online vacation rentals. (VRBO.com, VacationRentals.com and BedandBreakfast.com are just a few of the websites under the HomeAway, Inc. umbrella.)

Launched in 2006, HomeAway.com features more than 250,000 villas, apartments, houses and other properties to rent. VRBO.com, marking its 15th anniversary this year, has more than 160,000 listings.

Through the online digging, I discovered 'I Melograni del Chianti', a villa located about four kilometres from Poggibonsi, Tuscany. Once a farmhouse, the large stone structure has been extensively remodelled to include several apartments.

After wowing my family with photos and descriptions of the property, and after reading many positive reviews on HomeAway.com and other sites, I contacted owner Serena Brandi and booked our visit.

Months of anticipation ended in June when we arrived at the entrance to I Melograni del Chianti in the tiny village of Talciana. We sprang

from our minivan in disbelief. Despite the beautiful images and rave feedback, we had no idea until that moment we'd be spending six days in heaven!



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A view of the Florence Cathedral.

In our initial haze of bliss, it's hard to say what was more overwhelming: the heady scent of lavender, jasmine and other floral treats permeating the air, or the breathtaking view — undulating fields of olive groves and vineyards sprawling as far as the eye could see, all cast in a golden light. We were glued to the spot.

But not for long.

Our gracious hostess, Serena, soon greeted us with open arms and showed us to our apartments, making us feel completely at home in the idyllic surroundings. (Her grasp of English is fantastic — a good thing since we knew only a word or two of Italian.)

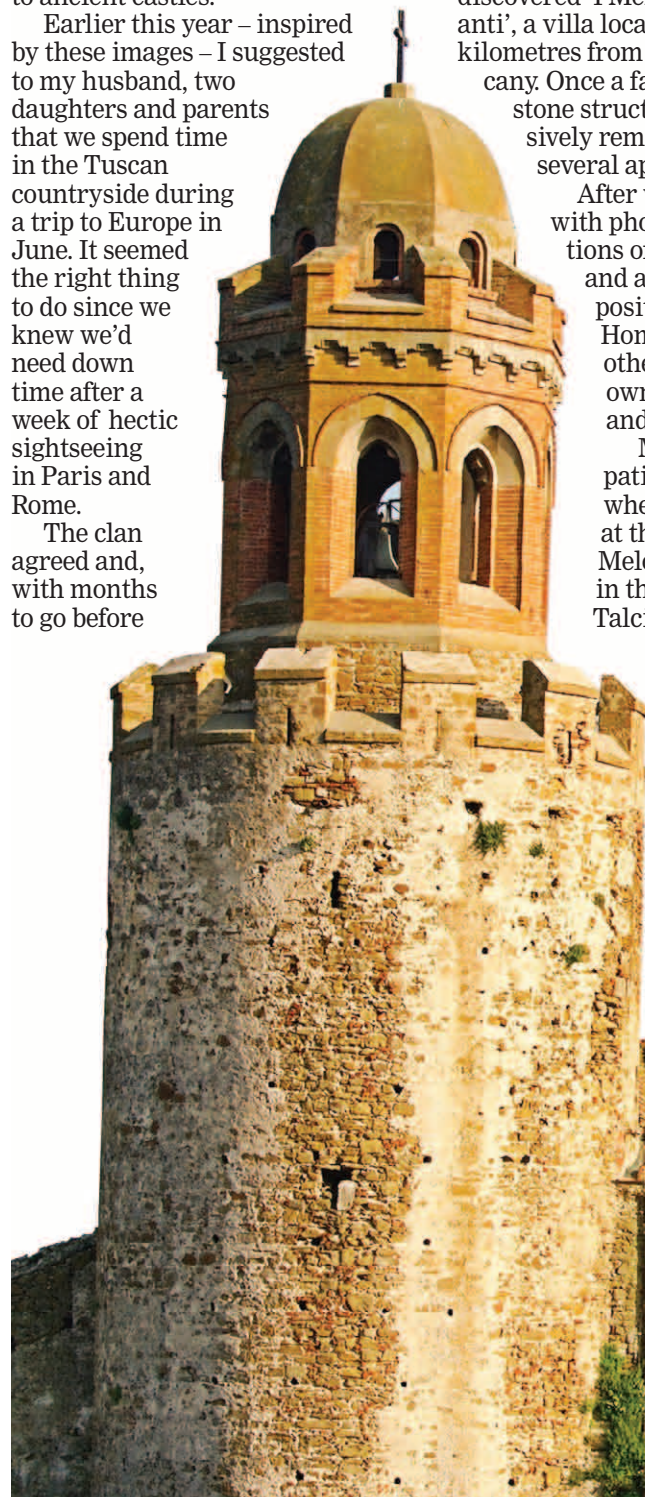
We learned that Serena's father purchased the property 11 years ago and suggested she develop it into a rental villa. A former purchasing department manager with oodles of energy, Serena seized the opportunity and oversaw renovations

➤ See TRIP, G2



DAVID KRAWCHUK PHOTO

The author and her family take in the sunset from one of the villa's beautiful seating areas.



Castiglione della Pescaia castle

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Help children make the most of their school year

This past week would have meant lots of chatter about a new school year, new backpacks and all kinds of new school supplies. It should be an exciting time.

Is your child excited about the prospects of a new year at school? Are struggles in school the furthest thing from their mind? Does a new year mean new horizons, new goals being met and new friends being made? If so, that's great for them.

What about the child who is not excited about school starting; the child who is already worried about not being successful, yet another year? The child who is questioning his or her ability and wondering if this will be the year that things change?

September can be a very exciting time for many children with the anticipation of another school year. However, this is not the case for everyone! Some children are already anxious, as are many parents. These are children who have experienced stress, anxiety and frustration with learning to read.

Every year young children begin school for the first time, full of curiosity and excitement. Many come to enjoy the daily routine of going to school. Others, however, soon figure out that things are not turning out as they had planned.

These are children for whom learning to read has been a struggle, even, for some, a mystery. Equally confused are their parents. The reality that bright children are not learning to read just doesn't make sense to so many parents because, in fact, it shouldn't be happening. It isn't reasonable, it isn't fair and it doesn't make sense.

As a resource teacher I was convinced that many children simply needed a different approach to learning to read. With a strong



What's the Word?

PRISCILLA WILSON

drive and passion to make a difference I set out to create a new approach to learning to read, one that would be fun and upbeat, one that would entice children, one that would engage children and allow them to be successful, quickly! Fortunately, my assumptions were correct and as a result, formerly struggling readers are experiencing success every day at Wilson Reading Centre.

In addition to using a different approach to learning to read, learning disabilities need to be identified and addressed. If a bright child is struggling with learning to read there is usually a reason why it happens and a solution to the problem needs to be identified.

Understanding why someone is struggling is extremely empowering for both the parent and the child. Equally empowering is the knowledge that a solution exists.

I am still amazed that so often the reason why someone has been struggling has not been identified. We can help with this but more importantly we can deliver what the student needs in order to be successful.

What if you could change things for your child? What if you could give your child the necessary

reading skills, confidence and an entirely new perception of themselves and who they may become? What if this could happen easily and readily?

If you have been a regular reader of this column you have read many of the success stories. You know that we have helped students from the age of 5 to 65.

I am happy to say that, over the summer, we have met and helped many amazing children by teaching them not only to read but to believe in themselves. This week was a very exciting week as children were assessed and their final progress noted.

Smiles were everywhere and even some tears shared by some mothers. Hugs were abounding as we said some goodbyes to some but not without agreeing that everyone was returning to school a much stronger and confident reader.

With such honesty and sincerity, a few young boys shared that they were "going to miss this place". It only took one young child to say so, and the others were quick to agree. Then one very insightful young child said, "Well, if we don't do well in school, maybe we'll get to come back".

I reminded them about how well they were going to do in school calling them our new "reading machines" a term that always brings great smiles to their sweet faces.

The fact that they were sentimental about being finished reinforces what I have been saying about everyone wanting to be successful and children responding to a supportive and nurturing environment.

These same children have only been in attendance over the summer. We met many of them as the school year ended. They were not only discouraged but certainly

questioning their ability to be successful with reading. In just eight short weeks of instruction, twice a week for two hours each session, all of this has happened.

I am happy to say that they are, in fact, returning to school as confident and skilled readers many of them at grade level, or at least very close to grade level. All of them have a much better understanding of reading and of what they can accomplish.

Many of the parents have agreed to tell their child's story in the coming weeks. We felt that the stories would be more complete with an explanation of how well things go with each child's return to school. I am excited to bring you these stories during September.

Whatever the case, as parents, your job is to advocate for your child. If you've been fortunate to have had your child's learning disability identified, remember not to take for granted that this year's teacher will know of your child's particular struggles.

Make a point of letting them know, right away, what will work best for your child.

Remember too that certain accommodations can mean everything for some children. If these are already in place advocate for your child to assure that they happen. Familiarize yourself with the accommodations that your child is entitled to and work with the teacher to assure that these happen.

Life begins with nurturing at home. This is followed by the need for nurturing and success at school. A child who isn't being successful at school begins to question him or herself. Understandably, this turns into frustration followed by anger and finally the child giving up; giving up on reading and more import-

antly on him or herself. All of this can be eliminated with each child becoming the keen and confident reader that he or she deserves to be.

Remember, that no group is more important than our children; no group needs more protection, more direction, more love or more guidance than our children, our citizens of tomorrow. They deserve to be successful. It actually is their right.

Priscilla Wilson is a retired school teacher and educator who now owns and operates Wilson Reading Centre, 99 Church St., Moncton. She can be reached by e-mail at wilsonreadingcentre@gmail.com, and by telephone at 388-5813. Her column on struggling readers and literacy issues appears weekly.



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Trip to Tuscany was relaxing adventure

Continued From G1

to create seven apartments within the space, which lies adjacent to an enormous pool, lovely outdoor seating areas and gorgeous gardens. With the help of husband Antonio, she spent a winter visiting local markets to select antiques and other furniture pieces to suit each apartment.

The results of their efforts are stunning.

My husband, daughters and I were blown away by our ground-floor apartment, 'La Mangiatoia'. As we stepped through its doors, we were transported to another era, the illusion aided by the two-bedroom's massive wooden beams, exposed brick and gorgeous tile floors. Striking antique dressers and armoires provide ample storage, while the full kitchen, living room and two bathrooms are ideal for a family of four.

Meanwhile, my parents couldn't have been happier with their one-bedroom unit, 'Lo Scrittoio', situ-

ated on the villa's second floor, accessed by a unique stone staircase. In addition to an updated farm-style kitchen, spacious bathroom and well-appointed sitting room, the space also includes a furnished upper loft as well as a comfortable shaded porch. (The latter was the perfect spot for a morning cappuccino!)

I was a bit concerned about the lack of air conditioning in the villa but with metre-thick walls and hillside breezes, the rooms were surprisingly cool. (Fans helped at night when the winds subsided.)

We didn't travel far for the first few days, so captivated by our surroundings. We did venture to a huge grocery store in nearby Poggibonsi, where we stocked up on some Italian essentials: good bread, fresh mozzarella, ripe tomatoes, local olive oil and tasty prosciutto. (If you have kids, don't forget the Margherita pizza, which my youngest ate at virtually every meal!)

After a few days of acclimatizing to the unhurried pace and the glorious weather, we made some junkets around Tuscany, a region covering about 23,000 square kilometres. With the area's cultural and artistic heritage — evident in its many churches, art galleries and museums — we had a multitude of interesting options.

One of our first stops was Florence, about 30 kilometres to the north. Once a centre of medieval trade, it is Tuscany's biggest city, with about 370,000 people. Don't miss the massive cathedral ('Duomo'), properly known as the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore. The Gothic-style church, covered in pink, white and green marble, was completed in 1436.

For shopping, the San Lorenzo outdoor leather market is a great spot to find quality leather goods and souvenirs.

We had other sites we wanted to visit in Florence but took a pass on due to heat and crowds. If you go, consider the Uffizi Gallery,

deemed one of the world's great art museums, the Accademia, which features Michelangelo's David, and the Ponte Vecchio, Florence's famed bridge — the first across the Arno River and the only surviving span from the city's medieval days.

Our favorite day trip took us south, first to Siena, then west towards the Mediterranean and the ancient seaside town of Castiglione della Pescaia. Once parked, we rented lounge chairs at a quiet section of beachfront and enjoyed an afternoon of swimming, snoozing and eating rotolini con pomodori (delicious pasta with tomato sauce) from a local take-out. Who needs burgers and hot dogs?

The journey later took us north to Cecina, then inland, where we zigzagged our way up to the town of Volterra. Like an earlier visit to the village of San Gimignano, with its distinctive towers and narrow, cobblestone streets, Volterra left us feeling as though we'd stepped into the past.

I Melograni del Chianti is, indeed, an ideal base for travelling throughout Tuscany.

And if the prospect of relaxing by an exquisite pool or sipping wine in the glow of a glorious sunset over the tranquil Tuscan hills also sounds inviting, this is the place for you.

(Wine lovers take note: Serena, an accomplished sommelier, arranges on-site tastings for her guests — not to be missed!)

Should HomeAway, Inc. ever need a role model, I Melograni del Chianti gets my vote! Having rented other HomeAway properties through the years, I've always been impressed with their offerings. But my family's memorable experience at this Tuscan treasure makes me even more of a fan.

For further information on I Melograni del Chianti, visit www.imelogramidelchianti.it or www.ituscan.com. Check out reviews at www.homeaway.com/vacation-rental/p416586.

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