

Five how-to tips

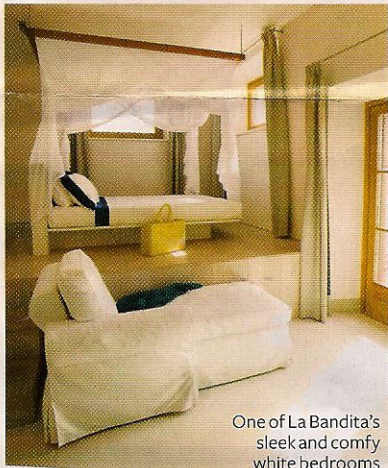
1 Book early. It's best to book a house for high season four to six months ahead, but if you've missed the boat, don't worry. Late deals do exist; just don't expect to find a bargain.

2 Check who the chef is. It's much cheaper to go for self-catering, of course, but smart houses come with a cook to prepare as many or as few meals as you wish.

3 Get stocked up. Top companies supply a hamper for guests with the basics (milk, bread, eggs, etc) on arrival and can often pre-stock the fridge or larder on request. Make this request for a stress-free first day when you don't know where the shops are.

4 Print the directions. You don't want to end up driving in circles in the dark round Provence/Sardinia/Corsica.

5 Take printed email confirmation of what was agreed, to make sure that what you booked is what you get (in case the cleaner fails to show or the washing machine breaks down).



One of La Bandita's sleek and comfy white bedrooms

TUSCAN TREAT LA BANDITA, ITALY

Sleeps 16

For those who fear that villas are always covered in chintz and cluttered with antiques, La Bandita is the answer to your prayers. This sleek derelict-farmhouse-turned-slick-contemporary-getaway in Tuscany's Val d'Orcia is owned by a former rock manager for Sony (who handled the careers of Christina Aguilera, The Strokes and the Kings of Leon) and there's nothing he and his globetrotting travel-writer wife don't know about making a perfectly functioning home-from-home look cool.

Unlike other Tuscan villas, this party pad is as linear and minimalist in design as a *Wallpaper** shoot. But it's comfortable too: each of the eight white-on-white bedrooms has its own bathroom – the bigger “deluxe” rooms have a decadent, rock-star-friendly bathtub slap bang in the bedroom as a focal point – and Santa Maria Novella's cult products by the sink. There's also a *hammam* to soothe your muscles after exercising in the villa's infinity pool or jaunting around the countryside on the bikes provided.

Mod cons include high-speed wireless internet access, satellite TV and hand-held GPS devices (for those out cycling or walking), plus essential services such as a daily maid (the sort of thing that, frankly, is about the most important part of any villa holiday), access to the host's wine cellar, a full-time private gourmet chef if you don't fancy doing any cooking yourself and a concierge to advise guests on what to do and where to go (and who'll make all the necessary reservations), plus as many free cappuccinos and as much mineral water as you can drink.

Set south of Siena, in picture-perfect countryside dotted with centuries-old church towers, your only neighbours are the sheep, so there's no curfew or tiresome sound-level limits on partying. You don't even need to pack your iPod – the owner's already thought of that. And, of course, his music collection is, needless to say, brilliant.

Black Tomato (020 7426 9888; blacktomato.co.uk) offers seven nights from £999 per person, b&b, including flights, based on 16 sharing. Lunch costs from €20 (about £18) per person; dinner from €40 (about £35) per person. ▶

So minimalist,
so rock'n'roll, so chic



La Bandita and, right, its pool

