

and antique tables covered in silver-framed photos of the owner's glamorous friends.

How different then are the dark and shadowy palaces along Venice's Grand Canal, of which the best are Palazzo di Santo Stefano and Palazzo Accademia. **Palazzo di Santo Stefano** (UP; sleeps six; \$\$\$\$) belongs to a family that settled here in the 11th century. Begun in 1570, the palace has a formidable past, including doges, kings, philosophers, and heretics. (For the literary among you: Lord Byron rented the house from 1818 to 1819.) Enter through a private water door on the Grand Canal or through a garden in the back. Dark paneled walls are covered with world-class paintings, and in the library (the former chapel), choir stalls are piled high with leather-bound books. The balcony, with its padded cushions on the railing for resting elbows while watching passing boats, is just too chic.

**Palazzo Accademia** (LB; sleeps four; \$\$\$\$), located near Venice's Accademia bridge, has a similar feel—except it's smaller and less cluttered with family paraphernalia. Think of it as a "boutique palace," ideal for a discerning couple with aspirations of grandeur (what a party you could hold in the formal dining room!) or for a deeply romantic honeymoon. The principal "doge's bedroom" has a small bathroom hidden behind aged fabric walls. In places, the silk is thinning, but then that's what gives this rental heart. In the afternoons, music floats in from the nearby *conservatorio*.

For a lighter, sunnier style, try **Palazzo San Tomà** (LB; sleeps six; \$\$\$\$), situated on the Grand Canal. Decorated with moneyed respect for historical detail (parquet floors, painted ceilings with exposed beams, and Venetian furniture), it's also filled with a chic simplicity by virtue of the off-white palette. The master bedroom is notable for a canopied bed draped in white cotton and the wonderful sea breeze that pours through the open windows.

**Palazzo San Samuele** (LB; sleeps six; \$\$\$\$), also on the Grand Canal, is done in bold colors—bright reds, greens, and yellows accessorized eclectically by its well-traveled owner, a Colombian American with a Venetian merchant's instinct for all things bohemian. This is the place where you'd expect to find Peggy Guggenheim in white sunglasses, sipping tea on the balcony.

In Rome, along Via dei Condotti, I found two options, at opposite ends of the street: 26 Piazza di Spagna, at the foot of the Spanish Steps, and La Residenza Napoleone III, a one-bedroom suite in the 16th-century

Palazzo Ruspoli. **26 Piazza di Spagna** (LT; sleeps four; \$) is located on the third floor of a house that was rented by John Keats, the English Romantic poet. You sleep in a bedroom above the one in which he died (in 1821), in an apartment of almost identical layout, restored by the Landmark Trust to its condition circa 1800. It's noisy, the kitchen and bathroom are basic, and there's not a sniff of staff. But for the literary type, there's nothing quite as compelling as views of the world's grandest outdoor staircase from your own book-lined sitting room (downstairs, the Keats-Shelley House museum houses one of the finest libraries of Romantic literature).

If it's service you're after, head to **La Residenza Napoleone III** (UP; sleeps four; \$\$), where you are attended to by the family butler, Mosé, and maid, Betty, as well as the owner, the infinitely stylish Principessa Letizia Ruspoli.

Sicily's **Palazzo Alliata di Pietratrezza** (LB; sleeps six; \$\$\$\$), owned by the Baucinas, one of Palermo's oldest families, offers an exquisite example of aristo Sicilian style. Though bedrooms, especially the master suite, are fine, one books here to lounge around the public spaces. The 18th-century ballroom, with Europe's largest Murano chandelier, would be heaven on earth for a 50th-birthday bash, for example. Medieval family crests are etched into windows; a gilded armoire opens up to reveal the family altar. Just outside, there's a busy Sicilian market tucked into a shadowed narrow street.

**ALSO RECOMMENDED** For those who can't decide between city apartment or rural retreat, **Villa Caetana** (UP; sleeps ten; \$\$\$\$), a 15-minute drive south of Rome's historic center, offers a bit of both worlds without feeling like a suburban compromise. You can hear birdsong, ride horses, and escape the drone of Rome's Vespas, or you can dash into town for a quick lunch and a trip to a museum. The terra-cotta-colored house, built at the turn of the century, is wrapped in high walls and green lawns; there's an Argentine-size *asado* (barbecue), a gym, a sauna, a hammam, and a Jacuzzi.

## RUSTIC GETAWAYS

The rolling hills of rural Italy are packed with villas to rent that were created for a rapacious European market, and the trend has turned vast swaths of Tuscany and Umbria into the Hamptons of Italy. I have deliberately avoided those made-to-order homes

in favor of more unusual one-of-a-kind places still lived in by families. These include Umbrian **Villa L'incanto** (BI; sleeps ten; \$\$\$\$) near the town of Orvieto, a strikingly attractive house owned by two Italian designers. The rustic brushstrokes are all in place: pale green ginghams, hunting prints, a farmhouse kitchen, ceilings with exposed beams, and metal-framed four-poster beds. Lemon-, lavender-, and iris-planted gardens roll into lawns and sweet-smelling woodland. A pool with an adjacent loggia makes this an ideal summertime escape.

**Villa La Vigna** (BI; sleeps 14; \$\$\$\$), also in Umbria, near the Lazio border, has a similar aesthetic: fragrant cedarwood floors, a library decorated in tartan, open fireplaces, fabric-lined walls, and claw-foot tubs. From the pool, the eye sweeps across a vast gorge beyond which lies the medieval village of Civitella di Bagnoregio. The villa has an impressive wine cellar (the white Calanchi di Vaiano is produced here), a remarkably professional staff (headed by Rolanda, a much-loved cook-housekeeper), screening room, indoor pool, gym, Turkish bath, massage room, and tennis court.

**Palazzo Terranova** (direct bookings: 39-075/857-0083; sleeps 28; \$\$\$\$\$) a third Umbrian favorite, seesaws from exclusive rental to quasi hotel (at certain times, you can book it room by room). The four-story 18th-century palazzo is perched 1,800 feet above sea level, overlooking the Tiber Valley. The approach is via a picturesque but primitive dirt road (what Italians call a *strada bianca*). It's a long ride, but once you arrive, you'll feel little desire to leave. The food is wonderful, the pool heavenly, and the walking—along exposed ridges softened with the silhouettes of dancing cypress—exceptional. Terranova is owned and run by a bossy, convivial, and charming British artist and designer, who, in the palazzo's spirited restoration, has successfully retained more of her adopted culture than that of her birthplace (the colors of the 13 vast suites were inspired by pigments that Piero della Francesca used).

Sicily is another region rich with possibilities, yet its inland territory remains strangely overlooked. Among my favorites is **Castello di Xirumi** (LB; sleeps 16; \$\$\$\$), located a 20-minute drive from the city of Catania, or 25 minutes to the sea. It is a 14th-century farmhouse turned 19th-century fortress surrounded by citrus groves. There are three parts: the principal tower with four bedrooms; the central courtyard with creamy Moroccan-style loungers