

**Sally Brown** and daughter Elena are made to feel like part of the family in an 18th-century manor house in Tuscany



## Home comforts

**T**here was a time when owners of grand country homes invited entertaining people to stay for weekend parties. Those who stayed on, sometimes for weeks at a time, were known as "house guests". Food, accommodation, and entertainment were all provided; all that was asked in return was that the guest was good company. These days, most of us enjoy a less complex relationship with our holiday providers — we pay for it, they supply it. But, in a corner of rural Tuscany, a British couple is giving the traditional house guest concept a successful modern spin.

The house in question is Villa Pia, an 18th-century manor house set in five acres of box-hedged gardens and vineyards near the village of Lippiano on the Tuscan/Umbrian border. The villa is home to Morag Cleland, her partner Kevin Begley and their three bilingual children. In the summer months, Villa Pia can accommodate up to 17 other guest families.

Villa Pia guests eat, socialise and relax together and with the host family. They

also sit down to dinner with each other every night. It's a holiday idea that either fills you with dread or delight.

As a lone parent, Villa Pia seemed to offer my family the perfect combination of independence and company. I had visions of sitting with other adults on the terrace, quaffing beer while Elena, my 3½ year old, ran wild with a pack of other kids in the gardens. As an insurance policy, I persuaded my friend Kate and her two year old, Marika, to come along, too.

We met up with our hire car at Bologna Forli airport, for the 1½-hour drive to Villa Pia, which turned out to be on the hair-raising E-45, a lorry-laden dual carriageway that cuts through the mountain valleys, 50ft up in the air on concrete pillars.

Morag and Kevin never advertise Villa Pia, but it's so popular that in peak season only a third of all holiday requests can be fulfilled. It's easy to see why. Perched on a hillside beneath a 1,000-year-old castello, the villa has views across the valley to church-topped hillsides beyond. There are two swimming pools, a log swing, trampo-

line and two children's play areas. Three home-cooked meals a day are available plus all the wine, beer, water, juice and espresso coffee you and your offspring can drink. The bedrooms are huge and cool, with high, hand-painted ceilings, en-suite bathrooms and lie-in inducing wooden shutters.

Best of all, in true Italian style, everything and everyone at Villa Pia is incredibly child friendly. It's not just all the play equipment, or the fact that everyone else there has kids. It's almost as if the host of Italian staff, who dote daily on the resident children, set a precedent that results in an awful lot of parent/child bonding in the guests.

Then there's that house party set-up. Love it or loath it, it's certainly an experience. During the day, families tend to stick together and do their own thing, but at 6pm an early meal is served for all the children. Once the kids are asleep, the adults sit down (like guests on a 1930s ocean liner) to a full-blown four-course dinner. This sounds like a good idea but, in practice, it sometimes got quite wearing. As someone who doesn't get out a lot, I found three-

**Wild in the country ... Villa Pia offers plenty of space for both parents and kids to relax**

hour dinner parties every night quite a challenge. But I stuck to it, not least, because the food was unbelievable.

Sourced locally and prepared by staff from the village, each of the enormous and plentiful courses was delicious. Highlights included local truffles, untranslatable Tuscan fish and traditional *caccia* (short for focaccia) bread cooked on a griddle on an open fire in the kitchen. Best of all was local cook Beppe's handmade pasta. Vegetarians



### Way to go



►►► **Getting there:** Villa Pia's nearest airports are Florence (1hr), Forli (1½hrs), Bologna (2hrs), Pisa and Rome (2½hrs). Ryanair (0870 1569569, ryanair.com) flies Stansted to Forli from £54 return. Autos Abroad (08700 667788, car-hire-italy.com) offers a week's car hire from £155. High season, collected from Forli airport.

►►► **Where to stay:** Villa Pia, 06010, Lippiano, Italy (tel: +075 850 2027, villapia.com). Until August 30, a week's full board costs £500 per adult and £210 per child 2-12 sharing a room, under-2s free; mid-season adults £460, children £190; low season adults £350, children £105.

►►► **Further information:** Italian Government Travel Office, 1 Princes Street, London W1R 8AY (020-74081254). Country code: 00 39. Flight time: Stansted-Forli 2hr 15min. Time difference: +1hr. £1= 1.50 euros.

weren't best catered for, but luckily I had just started eating fish for the first time in 18 years. On the other hand, everything was so pure that my long-standing dodgy stomach cleared up completely after just a few days. Allergies have also been known to disappear on a Villa Pia diet.

As guests came and went during our stay, the dynamics of our dinner table, and of the villa as a whole, subtly changed. Kevin and Morag (who, perhaps significantly, both used to live in a therapeutic community for young people) were always consummate, if inquisitive, hosts who generally bowed out after the coffee. When a dry-witted London doctor and his down-to-earth northern wife arrived, conversation really took off. But perhaps that was partly the effect of the endless supply of rosso and bianco from the villa's own vineyards — the grapes for which are handpicked each year by the same guest family from Teesside, apparently.

One evening, Morag pulled out some letters written by a spiritualist medium in 1905 that she'd found in the villa's attic when they moved in. The attic turned out to be full of virtually untouched trunks, photos, fascist uniforms and love letters, all belonging to the Andreini family who owned Villa Pia for generations. Some of the people in the old sepia photos that now grace the walls of the dining room were even recognised by villagers as their long-dead relatives.

This sort of layered history is typical of Tuscany. Home in the 4th century BC to the mysterious Etruscans, in the middle ages it became a battle ground for the powerful hill-top city towns that still typify the region. Cradle of the

Renaissance and birthplace of many of its most important artists, Tuscany has been the essential stop on the Grand Tour from the 18th century onwards.

From Villa Pia, you can explore the cultural treasures of Florence or Siena. But with children, we decided smaller hops, interspersed with ice cream, were more practical. Our favourite day trip was a scenic, hair-pin bend climb to St Francis' hilltop retreat of La Verna. Despite being caught in our shorts by the mountainous chill and a downpour, we all enjoyed peering into St Francis' cave and watching the chanting monks parade past the beautiful frescos while trying not to smile at the kids.

In nearby Arezzo, we soaked up spring sunshine in pavement cafes, shopped for local ceramics and gaped at local lad Piero della Francesca's frescoes in echoing ancient churches. The highlight of the holiday for me was a traditional old bread shop on the main *corso* where an elderly lady with bottle-end glasses served Elena with *biscotti* to take back England while conducting a very long, and largely incomprehensible conversation with me.

Then there was the day we walked in the hills, in search of the abandoned village, taking the "white road" stone tracks — perfect for pushing reluctant walkers in their buggies. We also fell in love with the "undiscovered" fortified town of Anghiari where we bought local olive oil and wine.

There's no doubt that Villa Pia is an idyllic spot and, if you get lucky with the people, the house party set-up can be a good laugh. By the end of our stay, the kids had definitely started to form themselves into a pack. Now, if we just could have stayed one more week...

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