

a foreign field that is forever... tuscan

In search of culture, cuisine and companionship? Head for the Villa Pia in the heart of Italy



Culture and young children don't mix – everyone knows that. They howl, they throw their ice-creams at precious artworks, and they have a tantrum in that wonderful Renaissance church you've waited so long to see. But, on the other hand, you can only do so many Center Parc and Disneyland trips before you declare yourself brain-dead. And the Italians love children, don't they?

Indeed they do – although for some strange reason their own seem considerably better behaved than our temporary imports. What's more, theirs are pre-conditioned to nap for three hours each afternoon, while ours behave like mad dogs in the hot afternoon sun. All good reasons, we thought, to stay with other British families rather than hole up in an Italian hotel. Call me over-cautious (I prefer to think of myself as eminently sensible), but I thought our three girls – aged eight, six and two – would forge friendships more easily with children with whom they at least shared a language.

And so we headed to Villa Pia, a large, beige-stoned house in a hilltop village on the Umbria-Tuscany border, in search of culture, cuisine and companions in the shape of other like-minded parents who didn't want to sacrifice all hope of a holiday for themselves in the quest for happiness for their offspring.

Not that Villa Pia, run by Morag Cleland and her partner Kevin Begley, is anything less than perfect for children: within an hour of arrival our girls were a picture of contentment. There were the woods to play in, the heated outdoor pool to swim in, the other children to mess around with, the village playground to explore and – for the toddler – a playroom and boardbooks galore.

Villa Pia isn't a hotel – but neither, thanks to Kevin's former life as a chef at the Dorchester and his team of local chefs, is it self-catering. In essence it's like going to stay with friends (don't expect a key for your bedroom door, for example), only you don't actually know the friends in question until you get there. But get on with them you almost certainly will, because Morag and Kevin – who themselves have three young children – are full of helpful advice on where to go and what to do, as well as running the house with the kind of easy and comfortable charm that makes you feel instantly at home.

What's perfect for families with small children is that you have access to the kitchen day and night, so when someone cries for a cup of milk or an impromptu meal of pasta, you're welcome to help yourself (and pour yourself a generous glass of wine from the always-available jug in the fridge into the bargain).

Each day you're free to hang out at the villa and enjoy a buffet lunch with whoever else is around, or head further afield. Families who go out for the day usually return for children's tea at 6pm, after which the idea is to settle your youngsters (either to bed or quiet play somewhere) before the adults convene for a drink and then supper round the big courtyard table at 8pm. Villa Pia caters for a maximum of 40 including children – big enough to find people you get on with, but not so big it's anonymous.

With the delights of the villa, our only problem was prising our children away to explore the region. We reckoned the best bet was to a) lower our expectations, and b) take it in turns to look around museums rather than dragging the children round places they didn't want to see. First stop, though, was remarkably easy: just down the road from Villa Pia is Monterchi, a hill town famed for its possession of a fresco by the local big-name artist, Piero della Francesca – perfect for a quick tour, which even our two-year-old managed to survive.

You're spoilt for choice when it comes to a whole day out: Florence, Assisi, Perugia, Cortona and San Marino are all within reach; even Rome is, at a pinch, if you take the high-speed train. We plumped for a day in Siena – ideal for young children as it's traffic-free and you can invest in slices of pizza to keep them occupied as you drink in the scenery. Once you've survived that you can, as we did, throw caution to the wind and try a brief canter around the Duomo – you won't feel you've had long enough to take in the Renaissance offerings, but that's what I mean by lowered expectations.

Other cultural highlights for us included San Sepolcro, birthplace of Piero della Francesca and home of two more of his works, and Arezzo, a busy town and perfect for a half-day out if you want to give the children time in the pool and the woods at Villa Pia first. In a perfect world, of course, you'd never want to go to Italy and see as little of its culture as we did; but with three children in tow, this was as good as it gets this side of the empty nest. ■

Villa Pia, 06010 Lippiano, Italy. Tel: 0039 075 850 2027. Open end Mar-Oct; prices per week, full board; adults £440; under-12s £180; under-twos free.

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