

ITALY



The view south from the swimming-pool, across a field of poppies on the upper Tiber Valley. Left, Martha, Ella and Callum head off to the pool

Make yourself at home

It's not quite a country house party, but neither is it an ordinary hotel. **Jessamy Calkin** and her daughter revel in the informality of Villa Pia. Photographs by **Ben Murphy**

The trouble with taking small children on holiday is that it's often hard to feel that you've had any kind of a rest. Once you've had children, the very nature of your holidays changes completely. There is so much watching, following and approving to be done that it can be completely exhausting, and you're often quite desperate to get back to work. With this in mind, I had been revelling in anticipation of my arrival at Villa Pia, near Monterchi on the Tuscan/Umbrian border, so vivid a picture had been painted for me by friends who had been there and raved about it ('It's the only place I've ever been - since I had children - where I felt like I had a holiday,' said one). I imagined arriving in the early evening, driving through the village of Lippiano, past the 1,000-year-old castle and descending the drive to Villa Pia's sunken courtyard to find people eating supper at candlelit tables.

As it transpired we turned up very late and in the pouring rain, with two bedraggled small children (my friend Ros Badger, her four-year-old, Martha, and my three-year-old, Alabama), and walked into a dining-room full of relaxed guests feeling like scruffy single mothers on a council rehabilitation scheme. But the atmosphere was very informal - there was a child's scooter lying across the

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A moment's peace in the courtyard of Villa Pia

front doorway and a toddler asleep on the sofa, a huge open grill in the kitchen on which proprietor Kevin Begley was cooking vast T-bone steaks. The rain had driven everyone inside and they were all clustered around three large tables, chatting together. If the set-up felt a little communal at first (especially to the slightly frigid English sensibility), it didn't take long to relax into the swing of things.

Largely 18th-century, the villa's origins date from the 10th or 11th century. There are 12 simply furnished bedrooms – most (soon to be all) have their own bathrooms – with tiled floors and shutters. The front bedrooms are vast and overlook the courtyard; the smaller, quieter ones at the back have a view of five acres of orchards, vineyards and gardens.

Villa Pia really is like a cross between a hotel and staying with friends. There are unique advantages to the set-up: you help yourself to beer and soft drinks from the fridge; there is a vast communal cappuccino/espresso machine; you can just wander down to the kitchen at any time of day or night and get a piece of fruit, milk for the baby or a glass of wine from their own vineyard (there are 4,000 very passable litres of it in the cellar). The all-in price is not that expensive if you consider the extra charges normally made for soft drinks and snacks at hotels and restaurants.

Children's tea was at six o'clock, which they all ate together on the long wooden tables in the courtyard. Then there was a general cacophony while they were put to bed, before the rest of us congregated outside or around the fire in the kitchen for drinks before supper.

For the children, it's a lovely place to explore. There is a room filled with toys opening on to the courtyard, swings and ropes hang from trees and everything feels safe. Villa Pia has a lot of free and easy charm; uncontrived and unassuming. Dining every night with people you wouldn't necessarily choose to spend your time with stretches you in an unexpected way. The nature of the place and the people who run it (Kevin and his girlfriend, Morag Cleland) means that it attracts people who are, on the whole, sympathetic, but if there are a couple of prats there, then so much the better. It's always entertaining if there's a bit of intrigue – to have somebody to complain about when you go to bed, someone to bait during the long winey evenings over dinner in the courtyard. And if communal dining is too relentless, you can always eat out: there are good local restaurants (such as Gnaccherinos, a pizza restaurant in Monterchi, or a bit further afield is Sotto Bosco above Sansepolcro, which



It is a pool with a view; its azure modernity contrasting with the country. It's like swimming in a picture



Alabama and Martha in the gardens at Villa Latini

specialises in truffles and antipasti).

We were there with a wide range of ages and backgrounds: the youngest, Kevin, was six weeks old, the oldest, Digby, 82. There was an Irish contingent – three couples with assorted babies and toddlers – two rather uptight barristers from Brentford, three charming older couples from Dorset, a glamorous South African with her two twentysomething daughters. Several families were regulars, one or two were there for the second time that summer. The types of family Villa Pia attracts are to some extent governed by the time of year; we went in September when most school-age children were back in class. I would not recommend the place if you don't like children, but there are a few other houses in the village that Morag is in charge of renting if you want to be alone; in particular the beautiful 10-bedroom Villa Bianca. If you like, you can eat at Villa Pia and return to the village for some peace and quiet. It has to be said that at certain times of day the noise level at Villa Pia can be wearing, and I have never in my life seen so many grown men wandering around clutching baby's bottles, their faces set in slightly frozen masks of benevolence.

Kevin and Morag met when they worked together in a therapeutic community for traumatised adolescents near Godalming (the experience helped, they say, to prepare them for 'creating a community environment' and running Villa Pia). Morag already spoke Italian, having lived in Naples for three-and-a-half years when she



Clockwise from above, the swimming-pool; the classic Italian box garden at Villa Pia; Alabama and Martha

it out to the long sunny tables. The courtyard is surrounded by hammocks, tree swings, deckchairs and umbrellas – so you can have a leisurely breakfast while the children wander in and out of the playroom.

A short walk from the house, past the vines, Kevin was clearing frogs out of the swimming-pool; a few jumped in overnight and had to be removed before the chlorine killed them. It is a pool with a view; its streamlined, azure modernity contrasting sharply with the exquisite Tuscan countryside beyond it, as if someone has hacked out a square from a Piero della Francesca landscape and replaced it with a panel by David Hockney. It's like swimming in a picture.

Lunch is a help-yourself affair; dinner is cooked by Kevin, who used to be a chef at the Dorchester under Anton Mosimann, assisted by a trio of sultry helpers from the village (who look like supermodels – imagine the equivalent from a tiny hamlet in rural England; they would probably have three heads), who help with the cooking, babysitting and washing-up. Morag, meanwhile, is a very easygoing hostess: charming, Scottish, sitting around smoking endless Marlboro Lights, offering sightseeing advice and generally dispensing good vibes and not looking remotely as if she has 40 house-guests to stay.

Once you've chilled out and changed down a few gears, spent a day reading by the pool, stuffed yourself with delicious food, gelled with your fellow guests and chatted with Guido, the picturesque gardener/handyman, unambitious trips can be made – you are on holiday, after all; a short walk to Lippiano or a short drive to nearby Monterchi. The latter is a tiny medieval town famous for Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto* – the only portrayal of the heavily pregnant Virgin Mary, which is housed in a former primary school there. When you're feeling more adventurous there are any number of gorgeous places to visit a bit further afield – the fabulous hilltown of Cortona with its Etruscan museum; Sansepolcro with its elegant old cinema and historic square and lovely restaurants; Perugia, an underground city; and the ancient monastery at La Verna. Five miles away is Arezzo, a beguiling little hillside town with steep narrow streets and the best pizza I have ever eaten, from Baldaccio's. An hour away is Lake Trasimeno, where you can get a boat from Tuoro (there is a swing on the beach in the water, much to Alabama's delight) to Maggiore, a tranquil little island peppered with old ladies making lace.

There is always Siena, and Florence – only a 30-minute trip on the train

from Arezzo – though not an ideal place for small children (you have to queue for hours to get into the Uffizi, even in mid-September) and you can get ripped off – as we did – with a corny horse and cart trip. Having paid about £30 for the 'full tour', we saw Florence in a blur of speed and were practically tipped out of the buggy less than 10 minutes later. But what made the journey worthwhile was a visit to Santa Maria Novella, the former infirmary to a 14th-century monastery, a veritable palace filled with perfumes, powders, herbs and gorgeous little bottles of the most exotic unguents. I can inform you, this is the place where Hannibal Lecter purchased the soaps and bath oils he sent to Clarice Starling, in Thomas Harris's *Hannibal*.

If you don't want to stray too far from home, Villa Pia is just on the edge of Lippiano, with its bamboo woods and fig trees, divebombing jackdaws, Fifties-style playground and ancient castle (rented out for parties: Liam Gallagher and his wife, Patsy, recently went to a wedding reception there, *actually*). And even on a Saturday night it's as quiet as the grave – except at Debbie's bar. Debbie is an olive-skinned peroxide blonde with a lot of skin on show (Debbie Does Dallas, remarked one of the Irish wives wryly,



after her husband had spent most of one evening imbibing there). When I arrived there late one evening, flanked by Kevin and several of the Irish contingent, she nodded to me then looked at the men and shrieked theatrically, clasping her breast. 'I got stung with an 'ornet today,' she gushed dramatically. 'Right 'ere...' pointing at her nipple. The Irish gulped. At Debbie's bar you can knock back grappa, play snooker or eat delicious ice-cream. If there are any badly

behaved local youths around, there is not much sign of them in Lippiano, though on our last day we discovered that they were all at a massive outdoor techno disco.

Kevin and Morag also organise special interest weeks off-season. There is cookery, and garden visits – with tours to the most spectacular private villas and gardens of the area (as far as the south of Rome); there is a literary organisation which takes over Villa Pia once a year; there are truffle and mushroom hunting weeks, and between May and mid June is a spectacular time for flowers (there are hundreds of local spring flowers in the area and 22 rare species of orchids). And there's more: both a Prada and a Gucci factory outlet are nearby, on the old road between Florence and Arezzo, and a shoe factory, near Anghiari, where I made some very worthwhile purchases. And a La Perla outlet at Pieve S' Stefano...

All this and knickers, too. *Villa Pia, 06010 Lippiano, Italy (telex 0039 075 850 2027) is open from May to October (though other times can be negotiated for large groups). Full board £399pp per week, babies free and children aged between two and 12, £180. You can also book holidays online with Expedia UK at www.expedia.co.uk*