

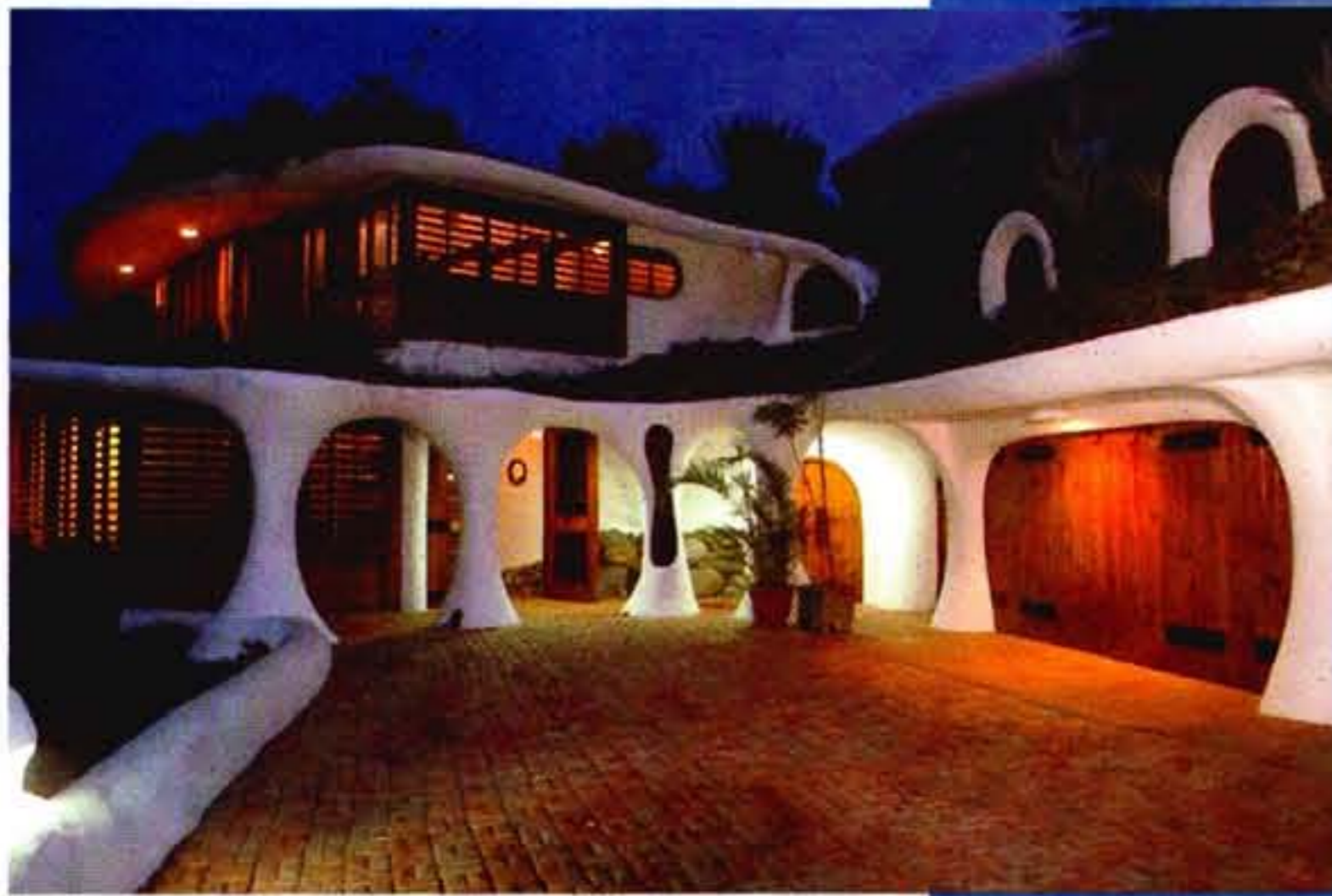
FINANCIAL TIMES

How to spend it

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BLAKE'S HEAVEN COMBING PLEASANTS AND ELVISIANA





New, architecturally daring villas in exotic locations with spectacular service, facilities and toys are redefining the high-end rentals market. Julian Allason is super-picky.

The world map on the villa company's wall is thicketed with tiny flags, each indicating the location of a luxurious rental property. Some are in unexpected new venues such as Croatia's Dalmatian coast. Other, more classic villa destinations such as Corsica, are represented only by empty pinholes. "Many of the houses popular five years ago no longer qualify for the top tier," explains Michelle Carroll, villa sales supervisor at A&K Villas. She is being diplomatic, for a surprising number of villas that used to command premium rates are now proving hard to let on the luxury market. They have been supplanted by architecturally daring new constructions and others re-equipped with the latest toys.

"Renters' taste and expectations have changed radically and, unless owners continue upgrading, they get left behind," Carroll explains. After a fillip of refurbishment when French and Italian "under the bed" money was laundered by mafia-connected builders at the introduction of the euro in 1999, many owners failed to keep pace with maintenance, let alone the enhancements necessary to compete with the glamorous villas under construction. To add to proprietors' woes, the hotel industry has got in on the villa action, offering full-service cottages in the grounds of luxury resorts from Sardinia to the Indian Ocean, all with access to a wide range of activities and facilities, including spas. The opening of exquisitely designed modern villas attached to Lémuria Resort on the Seychelles island of Praslin served notice of that.

The consequence has been a haemorrhage of repeat villa bookings that has hit agency cashflows and property maintenance budgets, many repairs being funded by deposits on private bookings taken for the following year. Nor have rental horror stories helped. One City-based professional couple who booked a top-of-the-line villa near Porto Santo Stefano in southern Tuscany found themselves sweltering in peak mosquito season without air conditioning. The two resident maids proved to be Balkan imports unacquainted with any European language, who were then sacked by the cook for eating the guests' dinner.

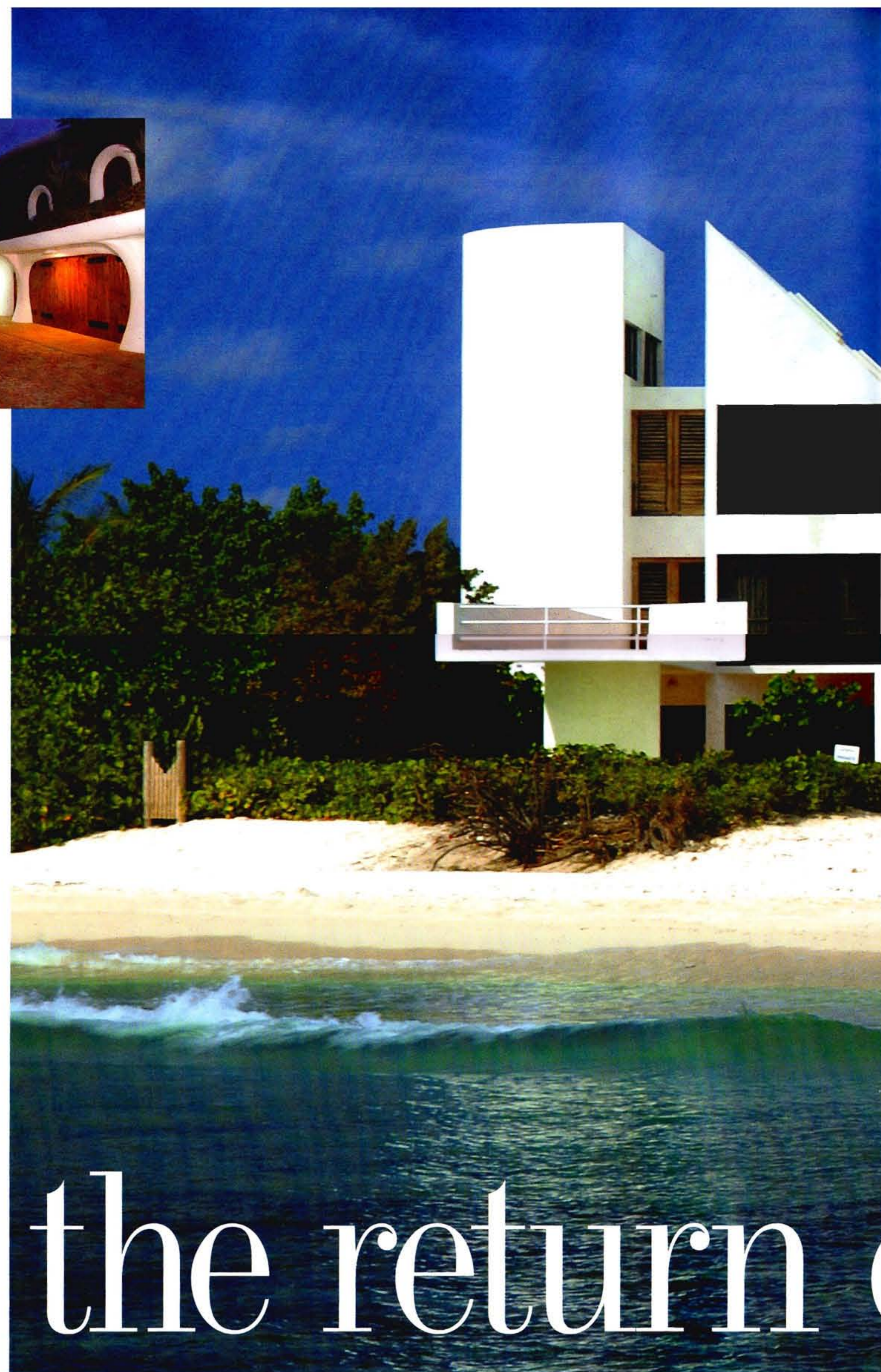
The maids departed – taking the guest's lingerie with them. Such experiences, although not common, have done little to advance the case of villa versus hotel.

So bad did things become that in 2004 villa rental companies broke their cherished code of *omertà*, and began talking to each other. In consequence, villa owners have faced a united ultimatum described by one agent as, "Do up or shut up." Appreciation of the longer rental season prevailing at the

top end of the market helped persuade some owners of the value of upgrading their properties, occasionally to spectacular effect. Much of the running, however, is being made by dramatic new villas built in exotic destinations such as Morocco.

From the exclusive Palmeraie area 20 minutes outside the centre of Marrakech, one passes between turreted gatehouses to approach Manzah al Jamil. A palm-lined drive winds past lakes to the main house.

Within, a vaulted gallery opens on to a peaceful courtyard cooled by a fountain, which leads in turn to a salon furnished in the French colonial style, with an open fire. Each of the five bedrooms has a marble ensuite bathroom, and the house is equipped with plasma screens and a sophisticated sound system. The outlook is onto a reflecting pool at the end of which is a 20m heated swimming pool. Beyond, amidst seven acres of jacaranda, bougainvillea



the return of



the full house

and oleander, is a gazebo for romantic dinners.

Expeditions offered include riding up into the Atlas mountains, wild boar hunting and a Berber lunch at the remote Kasbah of Toubkal. "In Morocco we have never lost our old tradition of personal service – in that respect we are not yet in the same century as you," smiles Youssef Benamour, chairman of London-based

Main picture: Russian Amethyst Villa, one of the Altamer Villas on Anguilla. Inset: Mount Hartman Bay Estate, Grenada.

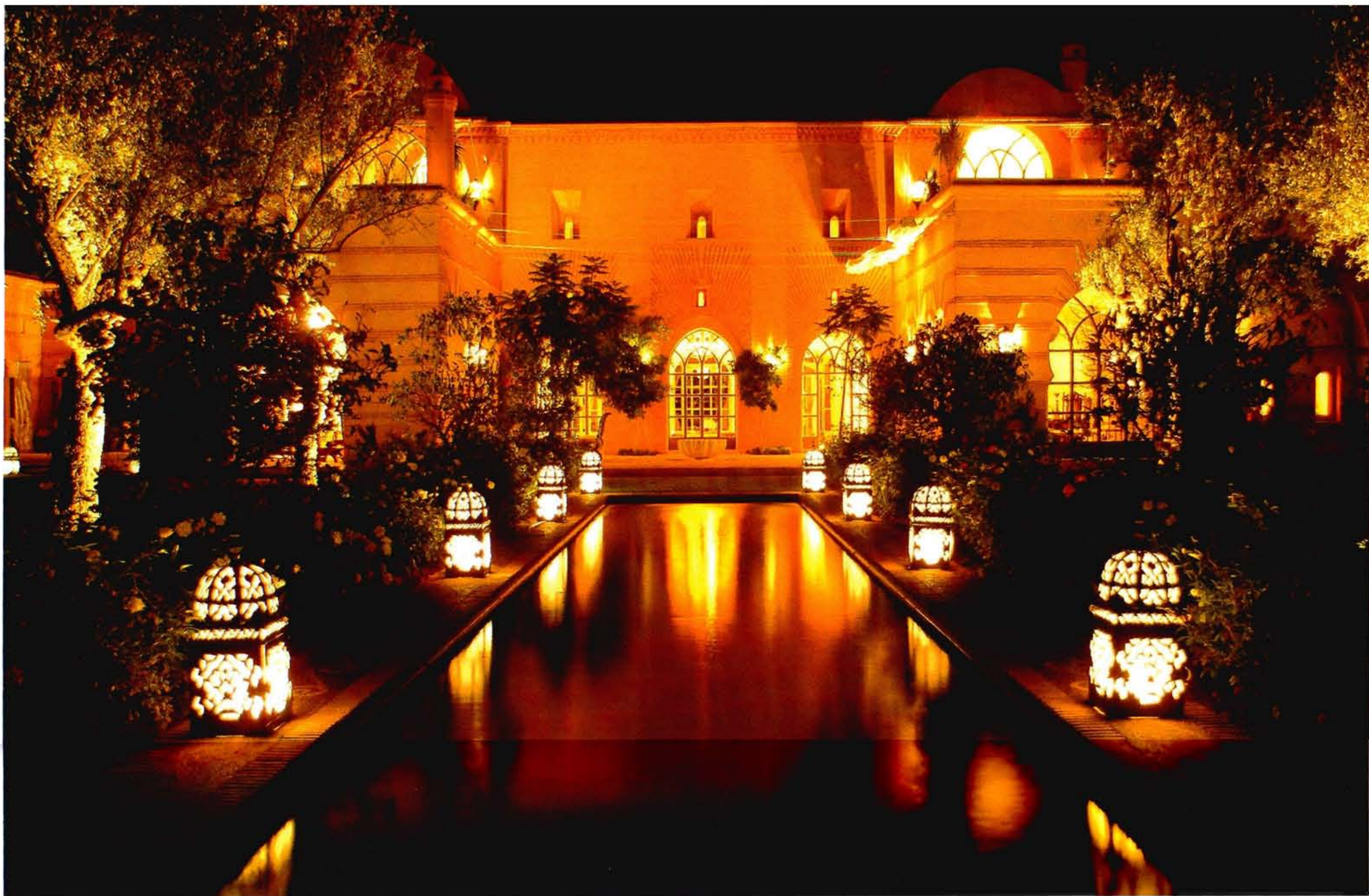
Villas of Morocco. With a full-time staff of 10, Manzah al Jamil conveys the illusion of a life owing more to the *Thousand and One Nights* than *The Sheltering Sky*, yet without any sacrifice of contemporary comfort.

Such exoticism is increasingly difficult for the owners of more conventional Mediterranean villas to compete with. Indeed, the impact of Moroccan service is

already being felt in the European market, and is one of the reasons for Corsica's fall from grace. "We are only prepared to operate where we can guarantee the level of service clients now expect," explains agent Carroll. That expectation is calibrated by what is on offer at five-star hotels, and explains the arrival of luxury tour operators in the rental market.

Concerned to match the resort experience, ITC Classics and Elegant Resorts

have both created concierge services – Elegant Resorts, for example, offers for rental the much praised villa Casa Lluna in La Font, Mallorca, and the equally renowned Elounda Gulf Villas in Crete – that aim to tailor villa service to the taste of clients, from cuisine to sporting interest. Initial experience indicates that renters are interested in adventurous activities such as hot-air ballooning and in attending Siena's famous Palio, the



The minimum requirements to qualify for premium rental include pool, tennis court, maid service, air con and WiFi.

uncompromising medieval horserace conducted in the city's main square.

In traditional villa territories like Tuscany the key issue is of access to local treasures, many of which are notoriously difficult to gain entry to without a personal introduction (and refreshment of the guardian). To crack this, Abercrombie & Kent has opened an office in Florence dedicated to arranging privileged access with expert guides and the laying on of special services. Villa renters this year have been able to participate in truffle hunting and cooking lessons by noted Tuscan chefs that commence with a shopping trip to the local market; all this in addition to the more usual provision of cooks, masseuses and charter boats.

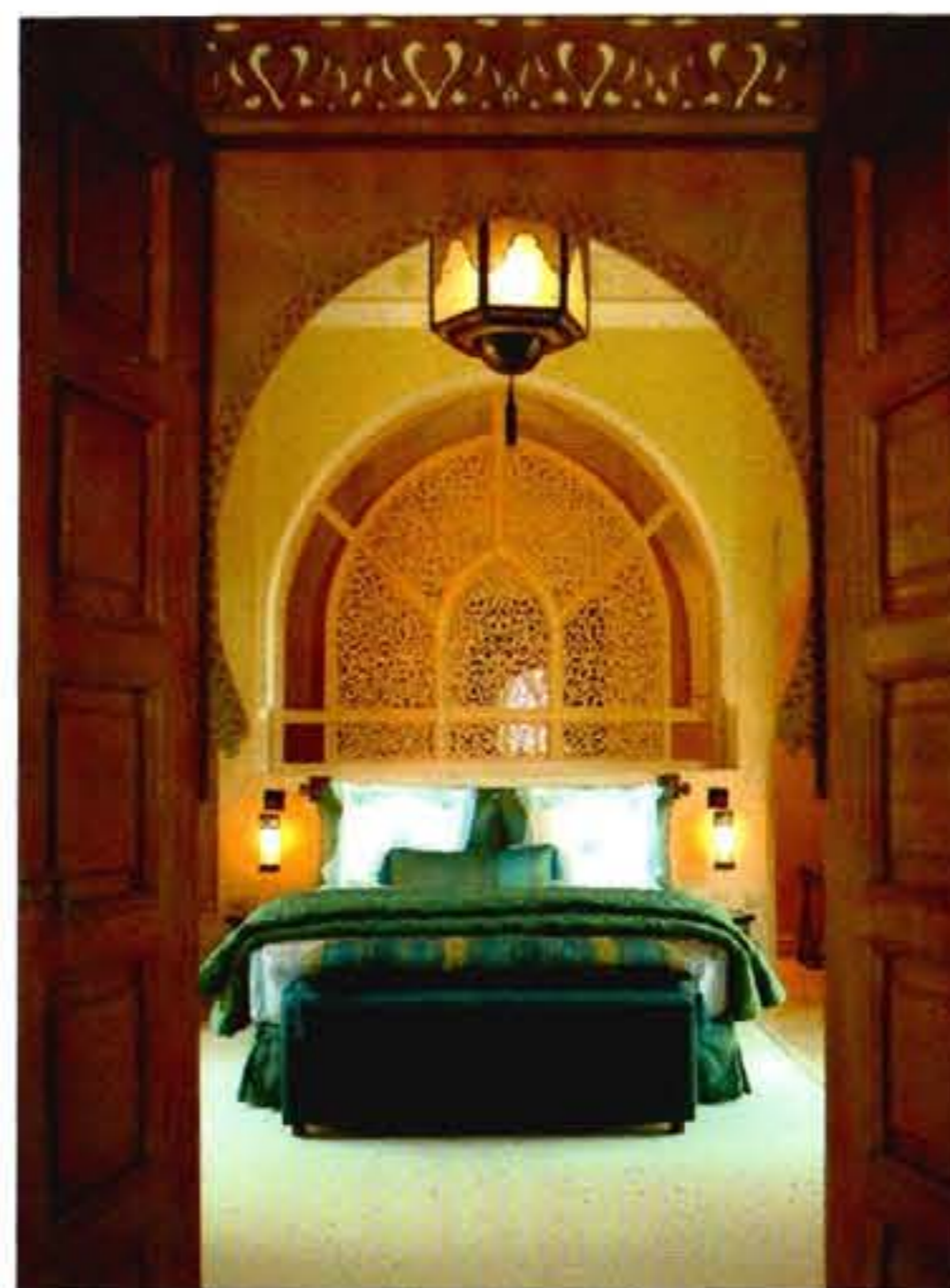
Central Italy's strongest suit is local charm. Villa Fontelunga commands spectacular views over a valley towards the hilltop town of Cortona, combining traditional Tuscan architecture with contemporary interiors. Originally a *padronale*, or squire's seat, it has been discreetly updated with air conditioning, tennis court and 14.5m swimming pool set in olive groves. An outdoor living room with chairs, cushions and a bar looks onto the Val di Chiana, allowing for lazy living and the contemplation of expeditions to Florence and Perugia. Eight bedrooms and one cottage accommodate up to 18, making it ideal for celebration or family reunion.

After a shakeout in the south of France, where prices had risen while many properties had become dated, some attractive private villas such as Le Mas de Faucon with views to the Bay of St Tropez are now available privately through their own websites,

and at rates that reflect the absence of any agency commission. Meanwhile, the Dordogne is popular once more following a general upgrade of facilities. Le Domaine de Foncaudière is a small, medieval château with cottages in the Bergerac vineyards, that is available in flexible configurations. It meets the need for character without being overwhelmed by the personality of the owner, a tricky balance to achieve. Yet even a property as magnificent as this would be unlikely to be considered if it didn't have all the essential facilities. Today the minimum requirements to qualify for premium rental include pool, tennis court, full maid service and, increasingly, air conditioning and broadband, preferably WiFi. Tolerance of lengthy airport journeys has also diminished – a difficulty increasingly resolved by helicopter transfers – while the suitcase problem is delegated to First Luggage who deliver bags in advance, the contents of which are unpacked and ironed by the maid.

Ironically, much of the inspiration for what is happening in Europe comes from the Caribbean, a region not always synonymous with efficient service. It was precisely because of falling standards that the entrepreneurs who have created spectacular villa properties there over the past few years have been obliged to return to first principles.

The tropical island of Grenada provides the waterfront setting for Mount Hartman Bay Estate on the hillside looking out over a lovely bay to a nature reserve. An eccentric design, described by the British owner as "Gollum meets Gaudi", combines



Top and above: **Manzah al Jamil, near Marrakech, conveys the illusion of a life out of the *Thousand and One Nights*.**

Biedermeier furniture with an internal waterfall that cascades beside the staircase down to the reception room.

Between them the Estate House and the Beach House accommodate 22, all of whom can be seated for dinner prepared by a cook trained by the Prince of Wales's own chef. Characteristically for such properties, all drinks, including champagne, are complimentary. Gadgetry includes retractable awnings with in-built vaporisers to keep guests cool, and a pair of Shogun 4x4s. There are also some serious aquatic toys, notably a Bladerunner 51 powerboat capable of 70 knots, plus sea scooters for exploring the reefs.

Cruising up to Altamer Villas on Anguilla, a dozen islands to the north, the impression that one has strayed onto the set of a 007 movie is hardly dispelled by the information that the architect was Myron Goldfinger and the interiors were designed by June

Goldfinger. Three playfully geometric castles of glass ascend from a coral white beach, the interiors dancing with light reflected from the aquamarine of Shoal Bay West. Futuristic palaces softened with a flourish of art deco, these are vacation houses like no others where such guests as Brad Pitt seek privacy in the smallest. The two larger houses, just up the beach, have become favoured Hollywood and Wall Street venues for celebration, adding the necessary drama to an island otherwise unspoiled almost to the point of somnolence.

Master bedrooms soar two stories in height, their glass walls and skylights shaded at night by electrically controlled screens. Each of the three houses is under the command of a butler, with a barman, chef and maids on hand, and a masseuse just a request away. Speedboats hover offshore, ready to bear guests off to St Barths for lunch or St Martin for shopping, should fishing, diving and crab-racing pall.

With few houses available to rent locally and only the island's tradition of hospitality for visitors to draw upon, Altamer's owner, Rebecca Eggleton, was obliged to rethink the whole villa concept. "I found what guests were now looking for was a world away from the European experience, let alone the patrician Caribbean villa life established by Ian Fleming and Noël Coward half a century ago," she explains. Although exotically decorated with Latin American motifs Brazilian Emerald does not feel like someone else's house. "It is designed to feel like yours for the duration," Eggleton adds. And to a remarkable degree it does.

The Caribbean destination with the best lessons to offer European villa owners is St Barthélemy, the small French island described by one villa owner as "St Tropez west". The simile is not inapplicable to the rental houses, which until recently



remained distinctively French in tone and Tropezian in pricing. Each one on the books of leading agent Sibarth Real Estate

commands spectacular views of green clad mountains and azure bays. Some of the finest, on the western tip, look up the chain of islands to St Martin and Anguilla. Almost without exception they have infinity pools, air conditioning, broadband and are immaculately maintained. Service is provided by French and Portuguese staff familiar with the needs of demanding owners – and renters with unusual requests.

The level of innovation here is high, with the French colonial style favoured by

Above left: the newly completed Villa Vue, St Barths. Above right: Villa Fontelunga in Tuscany commands spectacular views.

owners such as photographer Patrick Demarchelier now giving way to a crisper contemporary look. Villa Vue, a recently completed

family villa, looks down on the tiny port of Gustavia and the flotilla of yachts riding at anchor among the islands that guard its approach. Three bedrooms, state-of-the-art bathrooms and professional kitchen, dining area and living room occupy the main level, simply furnished throughout with Argentine furniture upholstered in hide. Just below in a typical island cottage is the master bedroom suite with its own Jacuzzi and a little terrace on which to enjoy breakfast overlooking the harbour. Location, décor



and finish appear faultless and service is provided at the frequency required.

For families and groups holidaying together villa rental, even at the top end, can compare favourably with the cost of staying at a luxury hotel, and with all the privacy and none of the restraint that that would entail. The issue is one of choice: experienced renters maintain there is no substitute for inspection in advance and often devote a day of holiday to viewing properties for the following year. Advice from one of the handful of agents servicing the premium end should prove invaluable and most will happily produce a CD, sometimes a movie DVD, of properties – even if some of the former favourite destinations may be conspicuous by their absence. ♦

MASTERS OF THE HOUSE

Julian Allason visited Anguilla and St Barths as a guest of **ITC Classics** (01244-355 527; www.itc-classics.co.uk/villas) which offers seven nights at **Mount Hartman Bay Estate**, Grenada, from £3,335 per person, based on full occupancy (22 people), including return economy flights from London, all food and wines, and use of boats and 4WDs. Upgrade to BA business class from £1,500 round trip.