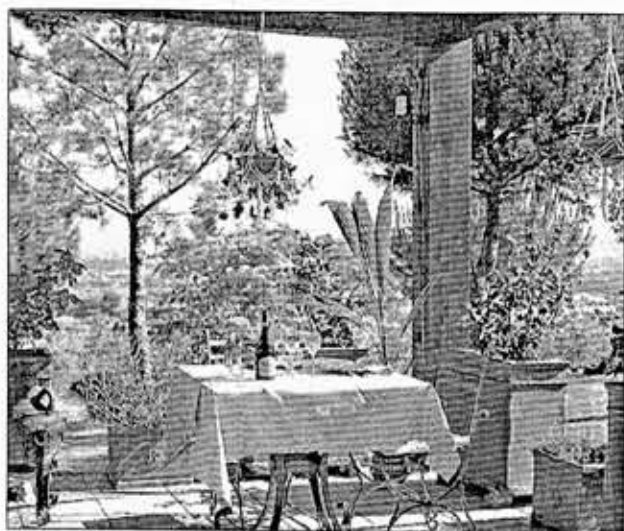


Rent a real slice of Italian life



Restaurant terrace at Santa Maria degli Ancillotti

Umbria is cheaper and less touristy than Tuscany — but just as inviting, says **Chloë Bryan-Brown**

WHY rent a villa in Umbria when Tuscany, with its beautiful scenery, atmosphere, culture and delicious food, is next door? Well, as apologists will tell you, Umbria has all the appeal of its enduringly popular neighbour and a few more things besides.

It's cheaper, with equivalent properties going for between 10 and 20 per cent a week less than in Tuscany during the peak season. It is also less touristy, although times are changing. In recent years an overspill from Tuscany of American, German and Dutch visitors has opened the eyes of Umbrian politicians and residents to the potential of tourism and there has been a rush to create holiday homes out of existing buildings. Britons and Australians have started coming, too, and it has had its fair share of celebrity holiday-makers such as Madonna and the film star Kirstie Alley.

Having stayed in both

regions, I would say Umbria has a slightly more workaday atmosphere. I was more aware of people going about their business than in Tuscany where, lovely as it is, I felt as if I were locked in a tourist bubble. I also felt more inclined towards sightseeing in Umbria, with Assisi and Orvieto proving more accessible than overcrowded Florence or Siena.

Umbria does have drawbacks, however. There is no coast, it can be wet and some of the properties can be cramped and characterless.

Outlined here are the types of property available, with tips on how to get the best from your let, and a selection of properties from leading operators. Prices given are for two weeks in the August peak season.

Villas

There are fewer really grand villas available than in Tuscany, and those there are tend to get snapped up by the end of January. Less grand villas with private pools are also popular, frequently offering the

best facilities in the most scenic settings with the greatest privacy. They are not cheap but can be surprisingly good value when the cost is divided among friends or families.

● **Casale Piccino** (Vacanze in Italia), near Colicello, sleeps eight and a baby, £3,419 per property, including one week's car hire but not flights.

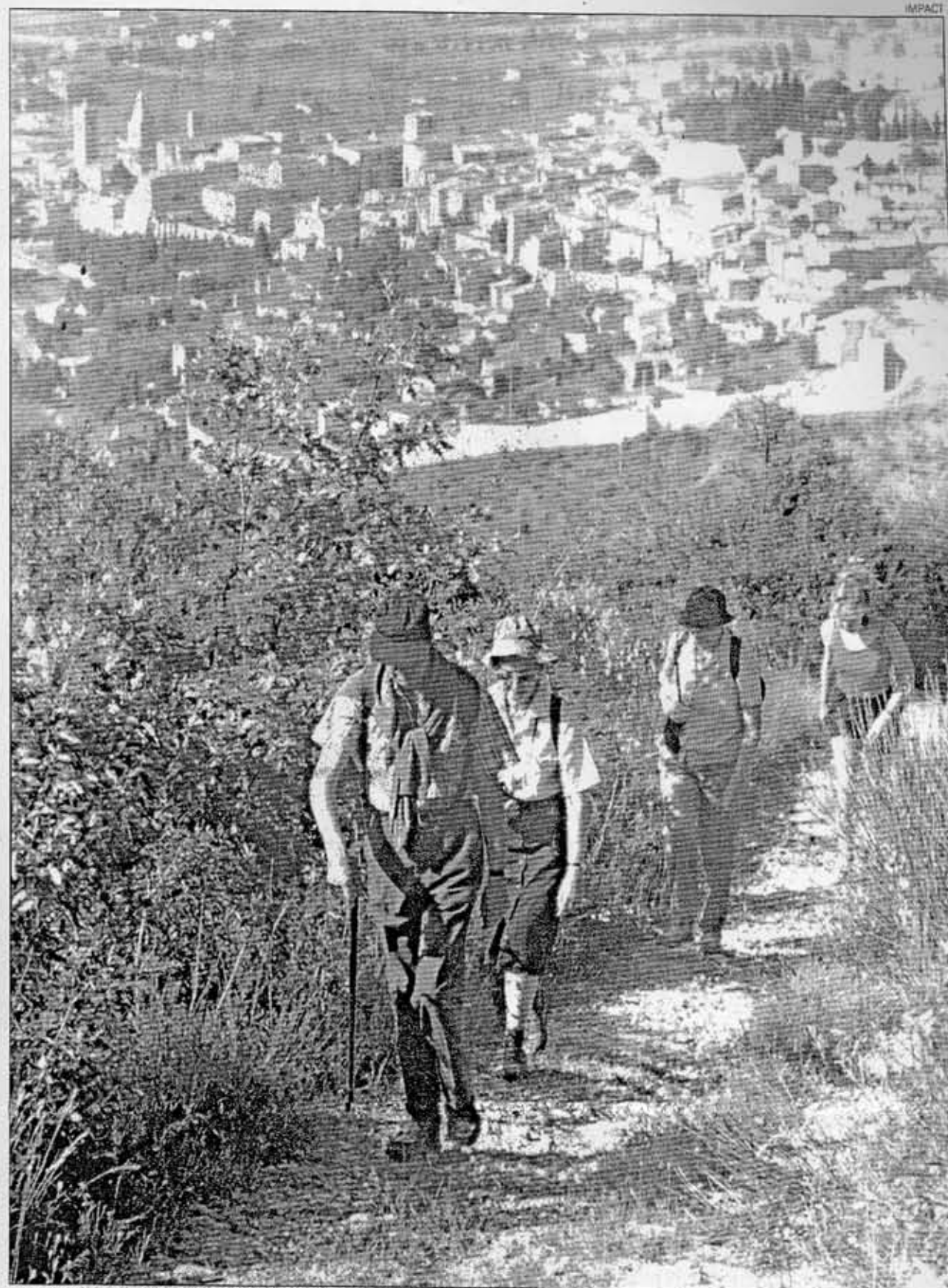
This 18th-century house is secluded yet within (robust) walking distance of Colicello, a small village with a grocery store. There is a well-equipped kitchen and a comfortable sitting room. Outside is a large floodlit pool and lawns big enough for rumbustious children. The friendly owners, who sometimes use the basement flat, do not speak English.

● **Casa Maliarda** (Traditional Tuscany), near Trevi and Orvieto, sleeps six, £1,680 per property, not including flights or car hire. This romantic old farmhouse is set on a hill with sweeping views over Umbria to Tuscany. The interior is homely and



Re Artù, a former farmhouse near Assisi, which has been converted into apartments

comfortable although the kitchen is rather cramped and the stairs steep. The pool is on a slope just beneath the house. Ideal for groups who want to get away from it all, but others might find it isolated and the steep drive up from Spoleto



Visitors can enjoy exploring the hills of Umbria, which afford wonderful views over the surrounding villages and countryside

and Trevi can be rather off-putting. Arrive in daylight and bring supplies with you.

● **Ceccomoro** (CV Travel) near Todi, sleeps 12, £8,788 per property, rental only.

If the characters of ITV's *Cold Feet* were to take a villa in Umbria it would be this elegant conversion, with minimalist furniture and all mod cons.

They could have their souls in the fashionably decorated sitting/dining room and the landscaped pool area. Suitable for large family groups, but I would worry about children spoiling the furniture.

● **Cottage Lavanda** (Cottages to Castles), near Monte Castello di Vibio, sleeps nine, £668 per adult, £610 per child, including two hire cars and flights.

A comfy house with higgledy-piggledy rooms, panoramic views and pretty gardens. Most of the accommodation is on the second floor with a separate double room downstairs.

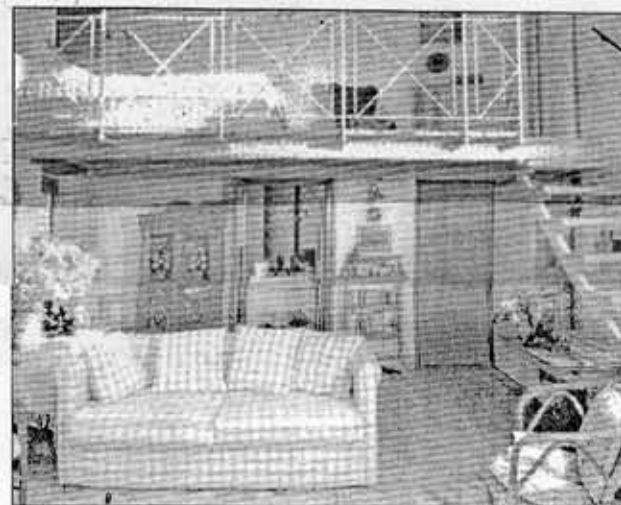
Plenty of easy chairs and a proper kitchen with space for a large family to eat, as well as a barbecue. Wonderfully secluded and safe for children, yet less than a mile to the nearest shop.

● **La Lodola and Le Crite** (both Vacanze in Italia), near Civitella del Lago, sleeps four to five/two to four, £2,236 per property including car hire but not flights.

Functional two-storey houses set side by side in a secluded spot with views over wooded hills, vineyards and olive groves. Good for two families who want to maintain some privacy but don't mind sharing the pool or the outdoor eating area.

Apartments on estates

Umbria abounds with large family estates and the owners have converted disused buildings into holiday homes. They



Lovers' retreat: Casa dei Fiori Blu near Civitella del Lago

are atmospheric but having the owners constantly on hand can be inhibiting — check whether they will be present.

● **La Torretta**, Castello di Reschio Estate (Simply Tuscany & Umbria), near Lisciano Niccone, sleeps two, £3,264 per property, including flights and car hire. A small, private studio apartment tucked into a tower on a large medieval estate. Billed as suitable for honeymooners and romantic interludes, the main room is dominated by a large double bed.

It is nicely furnished but lacks a comfortable place to eat. There is a small, well-equipped kitchen. The pool, occasionally used by the owner's family, is a short walk away. No children.

Apartment clusters

These are often farmhouses and outlying buildings converted into several apartments within a small area. They include the best and worst of properties. Some, such as Re Artù (see right), have been thoughtfully designed with guests' privacy and comfort in

mind. Others can be extremely poky and drab. You should check whether each apartment has its own entrance, sitting area and terrace or garden.

● **La Casa Colonica** (Simply Tuscany & Umbria), near Lake Trasimeno, one and two-bedroom apartments, £922 per person, including flights and car hire.

Not the best views in Umbria but the garden is large and well-kept with swings, seesaw and slide to keep children happy, and gates to keep them in. There is a barbecue area and separate pools for adults and toddlers. The apartments are well maintained with friendly owners on hand most days to sort out problems.

● **Casa I Boschi** (Cottages to Castles), near Umbertide, one cottage and three apartments sleeping two to six, £695 per adult, £638 per child, including car hire and flights.

More spacious than many, each property has its own entrance and you are unlikely to feel on top of your neighbours. The properties are fitted out

with old-fashioned furnishings. The high point is the pool from which there are views over Umbria, Tuscany, Emilia Romagna and Marche. There is a barbecue and a pizza oven outside. The owner does not live on site.

● **L'Uva e le Stelle** (Simply Tuscany & Umbria), near Orvieto, one-bedroom apartments, £1,022 per person based on two sharing and Casa Della Stelle (same operator), sleeps eight, £798 per person based on eight sharing. Both prices include flights and car hire.

Set in working farmland smelling of pine and lavender, the six apartments in a converted farmhouse are compact but attractively decorated. Downstairs is a cosy communal area with a well-stocked cellar for wine-tasting evenings. The bathrooms and kitchen areas are small, but Virginia, the owner, will cook on request.

The pool behind the apartments is larger than many others with comfortable wood and canvas sun loungers. Virginia is also letting out her former house, Casa delle Stelle, a short walk away. It is a large, comfortable property with a well-equipped family-sized kitchen.

● **Re Artù** (Simply Tuscany & Umbria), near Assisi, one and two-bedroom apartments, £1,052 per person, including flights and car hire.

The best of all the apartment clusters I saw, this former farmhouse, set in a beautiful spot on an unmade track outside Assisi, is spacious and private. The rooms are comfortably decorated, with sofas and easy chairs.

Kitchen facilities are limited but at just two-and-a-half miles from Assisi, eating out is easy, though taxi fares can mount up. Maurizio and Benny, who manage the apartments,