

travel

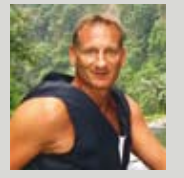
Homes away from home

Rental villas offer a relaxed holiday environment and often surprising value for money, especially in groups. Here are some of our favourites.



Meet the LOCAL

Expat New Zealander Stephen Michie owns Serene Villas property and management group in Bali's fashionable Seminyak district.



What do you love about living in Bali? Bali is a melting pot for about every nationality on the planet, all like-minded people who enjoy the relaxed tropical lifestyle and amazing climate.

Are there any downsides? Adjusting to Bali time can be frustrating – especially when you would like something finished today – but I guess that's part of the charm of living here.

What's so special about villa holidays in Bali? The Balinese are very gentle by nature and so are great in the hospitality industry. And having your own private villa to relax in, with pool and garden, must be one of life's greatest luxuries.

Any favourite local attractions? Don't miss Sari Organic, a cute vegetarian restaurant in Ubud, set in a sea of rice fields.

What, in your opinion, is the island's best-kept secret? Great value for money in these tough times coupled with almost-perfect weather, and a constant flow of interesting people.

What should people staying at your villas always bring with them? Bring your iPod. All our villas have docking stations and great sound systems.

Finally, where do you like to holiday? I've been on two cruises in the past six months. It's a great value way to travel in style and see lots of places without the hassle of flying and checking in and out of multiple hotels.

1 Greek odyssey

The movie musical *Mamma Mia!* was a welcome shot in the arm for Greek tourism. You can live out your Meryl Streep fantasies on virtually any of Greece's 227 inhabited islands, but one of the most famous is Santorini, with its white cubist villages perched high on the cliffs. Throwing open the periwinkle blue shutters of a villa such as Island Blue in the village of Oia to take in the view, you could be forgiven for breaking into an Abba song yourself. The whitewashed walls of the village sparkle in the sun and the volcano lies virtually submerged beneath the sea, encircled by sheer cliffs of green, red, blue and golden-veined rock. It's the simple life you get to enjoy here, exploring the island's churches and ruins, cooling off at its many beaches, partaking in

the fresh local produce and excellent wine and admiring its world-famous sunsets. For details of this and other properties, see www.prettygreekvillas.com.

2 Alpine chalet

The après ski is often as important as the skiing itself these days, which is why you don't want to be staying in some smelly communal ski lodge or sterile motel. Much better, a ski-in ski-out condo or luxury chalet with its own private hot tub for thawing out after a tough day on the slopes. Whistler ski resort, for example, 125km north of Vancouver, Canada, is home to a huge range of self-catering accommodation. Most have hot tubs and many have open log fires, to toast marshmallows and make mulled wine. In fact, being so cold out, you might find it difficult to leave the house at all. See www.whistler.com for accommodation listings.

3 Moroccan oasis

Formerly the homes of Arab nobility, riads were constructed as private oases within the hustle and bustle of Moroccan medinas, typically featuring a central courtyard dotted with trees, fountains and exotic flowers. Many have been converted into apartments and guesthouses. Nestled within the walls of the Old Medina of Fez, for example, is Riad Sheherazade, a haven of calm and relaxation from which to explore the city. Lose yourself in the sensory overload of the various souks before enjoying mint tea and pastries while taking in the view from the riad's rooftop terrace. Riad Sheherazade is one of the regular overnight stops on Insight Vacations' nine-day Moroccan Elegance tour. See www.insightvacations.com for tour details. A range of self-catering riads to rent can be found at www.holidaylettings.co.uk.

WHISTLER PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM BRITISH COLUMBIA

4 Vive la vie Française

Who hasn't dreamed of chucking it all in and escaping to the south of France, à la Peter Mayle in his famous memoir-cum-travelogue *A Year in Provence*? As Mayle discovered, owning a 200-year-old cottage or farmhouse can have its frustrations, but renting one gives you many of the benefits of living like a local, without the responsibilities of maintaining it. La Retrait, for example, is an ivy-covered rectory in the tiny Dordogne village of Nadaillac-de-Rouge. Built of local stone, with flagstone floors, wooden beams and a large stone fireplace, the house oozes character and charm. The village auberge serves the regional Dordogne cuisine, which relies heavily on foie gras and truffles. And the nearby towns of Peyrac, Souillac and

St Julien de Lampon have a variety of shops and restaurants, at which to sip café au lait and buy freshly baked baguettes. Further afield, Rocamadour is a magical town with golden houses clinging to the side of a cliff over the Alzou canyon. For details of this and other European villas, visit www.uk-europe.co.nz.

5 Balinese style

If you've ever drooled over the teak furnishings, terrazzo bathrooms, thatched ceilings and lush tropical gardens in design books such as *Bali Modern – The Art of Tropical Living* and *Island Style*, then you'll feel right at home renting a holiday villa on the 'island of the Gods'. Serene Villas, for example, is located in the heart of the fashionable Seminyak district. Close to

the beach, shopping, trendy cafes and nightlife, yet surprisingly private and peaceful, it offers fully staffed one-, two- and three-bedroom villas. Their living and dining areas open out to the lush gardens and pools, which creates a beautiful natural ambience. From this luxurious base you can walk the short distance to the Seminyak shops and cafes or take a tour to one of Bali's amazing temples or markets. But with a butler/chef on hand to cater to your every whim, it's tempting to simply laze by the pool, pretending you're some rich and privileged rajah. For more information, see www.serenevillas.com.

Tip. The best home away from home may in fact be somebody else's. Website www.homeexchange.com lists houses all over the world and membership costs just \$US99.95 a year, making it great value accommodation.