

The palatial Veneto villas for an Italian house party

An atmospheric 16th-century stay is the ideal introduction to this beautiful region, says Matthew Bell



Villa Saraceno
LANDMARK TRUST

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You know you're hurtling towards 40 when you would rather go on holiday in Italy than throw an all-night party for friends. But why not do both? Rent a 16-bedroom villa and fill it with your nearest and dearest for a weekend of revelry? That is the thought process that many of my friends and contemporaries seem to be going through — the invitations to weekend birthday celebrations are stacking up like Ryanair jets once did over Stansted. It's similar to when everyone was getting married, but now they all have babies too.

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Except there was not a nappy in sight when I stayed at Villa Saraceno, in the Veneto. This is the region that surrounds Venice, its capital, forming an agricultural plain in the shadow of the Dolomites. It stretches towards Verona and Milan in the east, and Bologna in the south. Our host had managed to assemble a party of friends who were either thrilled to leave their children at home or had yet to beget any, so we were free to admire the nearby towns of Padua, Verona and Vicenza, along with the neoclassical proportions of this Palladian villa, without squawks of “Daddy, I’m bored”. We could drink champagne and party until an unsensible bedtime under the frescoed ceilings of a house so important that Unesco has deemed it a world heritage site — with all the other Palladian villas of the Veneto.

It seems remarkable that a house designed by Andrea Palladio in 1546 should still be standing, let alone available to rent. And that is thanks to the imagination and foresight of Sir John Smith. In 1965, while a trustee of the National Trust, he decided it was a pity that the organisation was unable to save smaller, less significant buildings, and set up the Landmark Trust (LT) to let them as holiday homes. The LT has 200 properties today; four of them in Italy.



Eight more Veneto villas

1. Dimora Palladio

Another rare opportunity to stay in a 16th-century villa designed by Palladio, this four-bedroom apartment 20 minutes' drive from Treviso is on the upper floor of one of the villa's wings. The friendly owners, who live in another part of the house, are ever willing to offer advice on the local area. The apartment has classically designed interiors featuring parquet floors and hand-painted Vietri tiles. Outside you can enjoy the elegant public gardens, but also a private space featuring a pool and gazebo.

Details Seven nights' self-catering for eight from £2,400 (hiddentaly.com). Fly to Venice

This white-stuccoed country house with a pool, in the hills just outside Vicenza, overlooks the Valle di Silenzio, which lives up to its name. Furnishings are elegantly traditional and the garden is a delight, with two terraces for outdoor dining. It's an ideal base for exploring the Unesco-listed villas of the Veneto, with two close by: Villa Valmarana ai Nani, with frescoes by Tiepolo; and Villa La Rotonda, perhaps the most famous of Palladio's creations. **Details** Seven nights' self-catering for 12 from £3,510 (trustandtravel.com). Fly to Venice



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3. Villa Arianna

This pink-pedimented villa near Valsanzibio, southwest of Padua, has some of the most magical gardens in Italy, featuring a maze and grotto. It is tucked into a beautiful fold of hills fed by thermal springs. The gardens were laid out in 1631 by Luigi Bernini, brother of the sculptor Gian Lorenzo, as a celebration of deliverance from the Black Death. The villa was the summer residence of the doge. Today it has been stylishly updated, with Crittall windows on the ground floor and sumptuous interiors throughout.

Details Seven nights' self-catering for 11, price on request (bellinitravel.com). Fly to Venice



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Villa Asolo
BELLINI TRAVEL

5. Villa Asolo

If you love the Veneto's towns and palaces but find the flatness a bit much, drive an hour north of Venice to the charming hill town of Asolo. Centred on a perfect piazza, it's a well-kept secret, loved for its old-world glamour and far-reaching views. This 17th-century villa is set in acres of gardens with a splendid pool. A decor of pinks and pale greens makes it feel like a Venetian palazzo, but without the dampness.

Details Seven nights' self-catering for 13, price on request (bellinitravel.com).
Fly to Venice



Casa Asolo
HIDDEN ITALY

6. Casa Asolo

A smaller option in Asolo is this stylish house, with far-reaching views across the valley from its terrace and infinity pool. It features exposed stonework and wooden floorboards, plus luxurious touches such as marble-clad baths. But the best thing about it is the mesmerising views, which make you feel as though you're perched in a crow's nest. Children will like the 12-acre gardens, but access is not easy for the less able.

Details Seven nights' self-catering for six from £2,967 (hiddentaly.com). Fly to Venice



7. Il Tempietto

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This delightful neoclassical lodge has all the grandeur of a Palladian villa but without the expense. It was built in 1822 in the grounds of the Frasanelle estate and had a makeover in 2009. It has two bedrooms, a cosy sitting room with an open fire and plenty of books to while away the winter. There's also a loggia with columns where you can eat lunch and dinner in the summer months, and access to the pool within the park.

Details Seven nights' self-catering for four from £830 (trustandtravel.com). Fly to Venice

8. Villa La Quadrata

An excellent choice for a family get-together, this traditional 19th-century villa has ten acres dotted with modern sculptures. After lunch on the covered terrace, you can wander down through the rose garden to the striped pool for drinks at your own bar. The nearest village is the charming Bastia di Rovolon, on the edge of the Euganean Hills.

Details Four nights' self-catering for 15 from £1,330 (villalaquadrata.it). Fly to Venice

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