

Travel

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- This summer's swankiest luggage; Bvlgari's first hotel opens in Milan



The ultimate villa thriller

Annoyed that you've missed out on that 'great villa' again this summer? Here's a superb place to book for next year, so you can be the smug one

BY MARCUS SCRIVEN

VOICES clatter up from the piazza below as a bell tolls, followed by a momentary silence before a muffled incantation begins: passive church-going has much to commend it, I ponder, idling in bed at Palazzo Parisi. Those of a more pious disposition can saunter through another of the palazzo's bedrooms and out onto the roof and then along a stone-floored passageway to an eyrie from where a crescent window opens onto the church below.

Acclaimed landscape designer Arabella Lennox-Boyd recalls that her mother would often take this route to enjoy church from a discreet distance. Their family, the Parisis, bought the palazzo (which dates from at least the 14th century) at the end of the Second World War. At the time, Piero Parisi, Lennox-Boyd's father, completed the last four miles of his journey by mule, which was the only horsepower the roads could then sustain.

These days, Rome airport is just an hour's gentle drive to the south. Despite its proximity to the Italian



Competition time: you'll have to fight to bag the opulent master bedroom, left. The pool, right, has views over olive groves

capital, the palazzo and Oliveto — the pan-tilted village it commands — have not been entombed in crass development.

In the decades after Parisi's arrival in 1945, much of the population of Lazio, the surrounding agricultural region, drained away. Some scuttled off to Rome, others to Brighton cafés and Soho bars, leaving the Sabine hills unscarred and often unseen. It is still spared from the tourist trail.

When not communing with God from her eyrie, Lennox-Boyd's mother tuned her radiogram to the outside world and kept chickens in her bedroom. It was one of only three rooms the family used but guests now have the run of 16.

Her daughter grew up and studied landscape design in London, winning five golds at the Chelsea Flower Show and commissions from Barbados to Belgium and Suffolk to Spain. With unerring good taste she also traded in her Continental husband

for an Englishman, former Tory MP Sir Mark Lennox-Boyd.

Today, the chickens no longer peck about the bedrooms, although the radiogram and a photograph of Lennox-Boyd's grandfather, Generale Armando Diaz della Vittoria, remain.

THE renovation has been inspired but sympathetic, and the palazzo is a seductively comfortable home where you can kick off your shoes. A bathroom is crowded with coral and conch shells; a shower has been installed in what was a cupboard; a billiard room is lined with a library of books on art, history and travel.

There is a serious telescope and a backgammon board to play with, as well as an armillary sphere that illustrates the planets' orbits of the sun. It was designed by Sir Mark

House guests might squabble over

who lays claim to the master bedroom that contains a gilt-framed, gold-canopied trophy four-poster. In the barrel-vaulted salotto (sitting-room), the early 18th century frescoes have been deftly restored by Lennox-Boyd's daughter, Dominique LaCloche.

Those in the dining room open to reveal another cupboard containing a trompe l'oeil of lakes, hills and trees.

The palazzo is a warren for limitless exploration, particularly in the old kitchens in the basement that lead into a second empire of unrestored rooms. If JK Rowling's imagination ever stalled, a month or two here would probably do the trick.

Outside, Lennox-Boyd has adhered to her own gardening theory that "you should want to move from one part of the garden to another, to be stimulated, to make discoveries that excite or calm".

She has bullied seven acres of

STILL BOOKING

■ Serendipity Rentals (02920 443 844) has availability in its good-looking villas in France and Spain. Casa Morfil in La Heredia, Andalucia, has vaulted ceilings, carved wooden Balinese furniture and a terrace with pool. Sleeps six, £1,400 per week until 3 July.

■ French Chapters (0845 0700 616) offers villa La Retirade in La Garde Freinet, with views across to the bay at St Tropez, orange-tree-filled courtyard and terrace with pool for £6,860 per week (sleeps eight). Available 1 July-4 September.

■ Villa Podere Le Mimose in Monte San Savino, Tuscany, is available for a week from 21 August — overlooking olive groves it has a garden, terrace and pool. Sleeps four, £1,699. Flights extra but can be arranged from £265. Call James Villa Holidays (0845 458 4757).

recalcitrant soil into fruitful submission. Newly planted cypresses lead down to the private chapel and beds of lavender down to the pool with its view over olive groves and hills and unspoiled valleys to Monte Leone.

In the evening, the covered terrace beckons (an armoury of spikes march across its rafters, a neat deterrent to incoming pigeons and their cargo), its cane rocking chairs upholstered in pale green gingham.

Dinner comes courtesy of Rita, who prepares dishes of delicious simplicity, perhaps none better than her ravioli di ricotta with cheese made by her son. Book now.

● Marcus Scriven flew to Rome on Alitalia (0870 544 8258, www.alitalia.co.uk). Returns from £91. Palazzo Parisi (020 7931 9695) sleeps 10 adults in six bedrooms with five bathrooms (additional room for two children) from approximately £3,000 to £5,000 per week including all meals.