

We were counting on Villa Parisi to iron out any friction that might arise between 10 lovely people not exactly noted for their modesty

We lingered by a fountain on a shaded terrace surmounting the walled bastion of the hill village of Montopione, in the folds of the valley below, there were olive groves, and on higher ground, vineyards and clusters of oaks. About four miles distant stood a grand architectural pile, glowing in the rich late-afternoon light. Beyond reared the hazy outline of mountains with snow-like limestone summits. The air was razor-sharp and sweet with late haymaking.

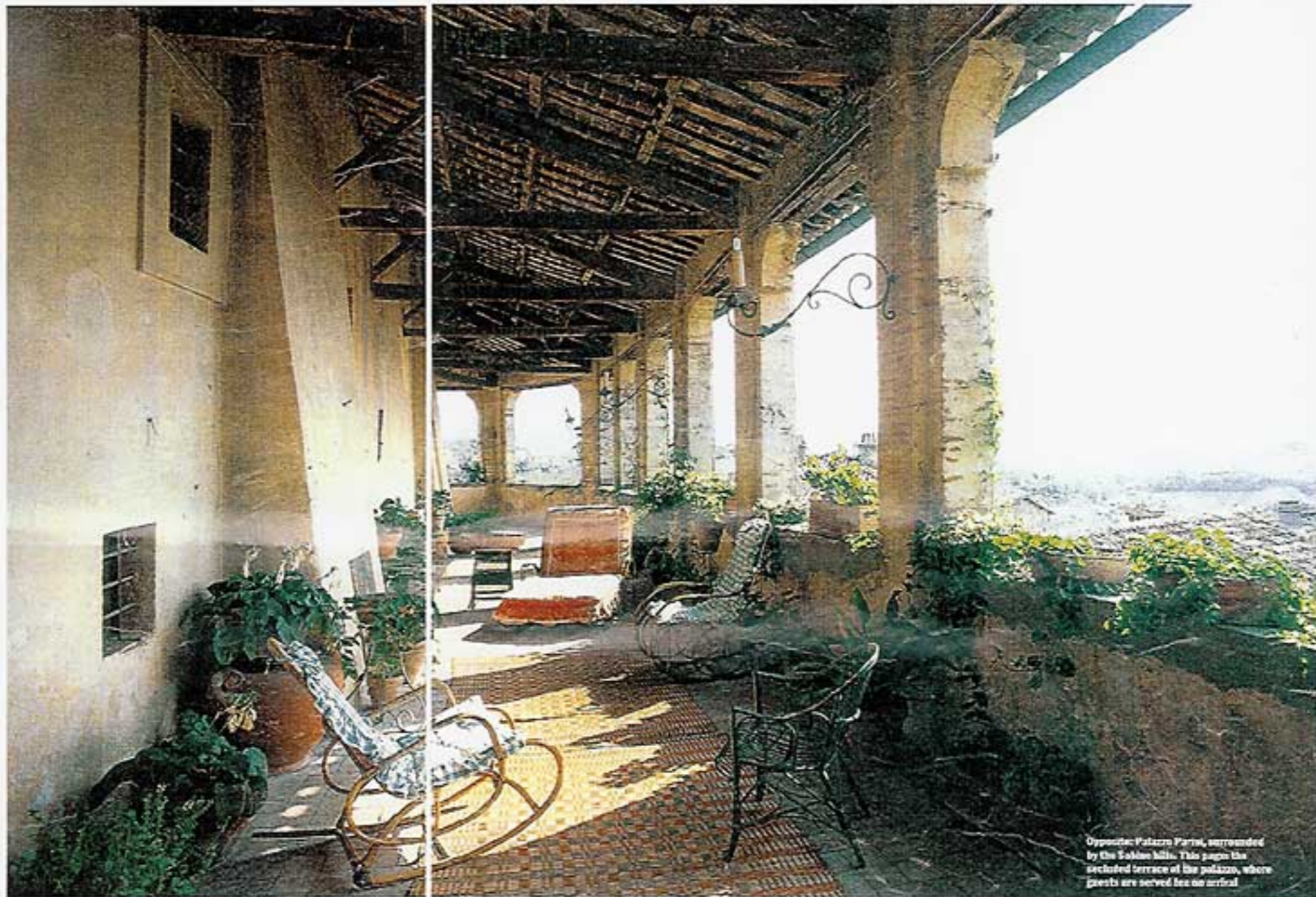
This is northeast Lazio in the midriff of Italy, the land of the Sabines, with the ancient town of Rieti at its heart. The quiet hills and forests of this region are still virtually undiscovered; tranquil woodlands (which inspired Virgil's pastoral poetry), dramatic lakes, mouldering Roman villas and solitude reign supreme, until mid-July when the Italians begin their escape from the cauldron of Rome. In our last half-hour drive through the hills we had not met a single car. Our destination was Palazzo Parisi, a noble, honey-coloured castle on the promontory opposite. It is owned by Sir Mark and Lady Larnock-Boyd, who let it to up to 12 paying guests at a time during the summer months.

When Lady Larnock-Boyd's father, Count Parisi, first came here after the second world war, he was obliged to travel the last

four miles of his journey on a mule, the roads being impassable for motor vehicles. There is now a metalled road eight up into the village of Oliveto that clusters around the back of the villa. Despite the new road, and its one-hour drive from Rome's Leonardo da Vinci airport, the district has retained an impression of remoteness and solitude.

As we drank a glass of chilled Frascati in the bar, we reflected on the wisdom of what we were about to do. My wife and I had arranged for a party — family and friends (and a 16-month-old infant) — to join us for two weeks, all expenses shared. Joint holidays often sound better in theory than in reality. We were counting on the extraordinary promise of Palazzo Parisi to iron out any friction that might arise between 10 lovely people not exactly noted for their modesty or their talent for falling in with the plans of others.

As we swept through the high wrought-iron gates of the villa, we were met by the housekeeper and chef, Rita, and the gardener and handyman, Marcello. Tea awaited on the terrace, a superb, barrel-vaulted cloister on the piano nobile. The first quarter looks out over a dramatic view of the gardens, the adjacent wooded valley and ridge with hills beyond. The second quarter looks over the village with its quiet, spasmodic rhythms — still deep in seats at 4.30pm. After 30-



Opposite: Palazzo Parisi, surrounded by the Sabina hills. This page: the secluded terrace of the palazzo, where guests are served tea on arrival

BLISS THIS HOUSE

High on the hills in Umbria is the ultimate retreat — your own private palace. And your friends can come too. John Cornwell masters the art of seclusion



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tea. Rita took us on a tour of the house. The Lennox-Boyd talk of their villa as a "peasant palace". There are 60 rooms in all, and some of them in the upper storeys are rustic enough, but the grandeur and comfort of principal rooms far surpassed our eager anticipation of a holiday "in style". The drawing rooms are decorated with fine murals and trompe l'oeils, dating from the 15th century; the furnishings, mainly English, offer a cushioned comfort rare in an Italian house; the huge thickness of the walls ensures ideal coolness, even in the height of summer.

The six principal bedrooms and en suite bathrooms are splendidly hedonistic, offering stunning views, ceiling frescoes, deep bathtubs, imperial dressing tables, and thoughtful touches like chaise longues and huge, snowy bathrobes. The beds were massive, conducive to immediate sweet dreams, an important feature, real linen (changed every day by the staff).

In the grounds below, Arabella Lennox-Boyd, who is world-famed for her landscape gardening (she is working, for example, on the new gardens at Sandy Lane, Barbados), has created a paradisaical setting for what must be one of the most luxurious swimming pools in Italy. A meadow lined with cypresses, fig trees and cedars sweeps down to an ancient family chapel, dominating a series of terraces with simple but elegant flower beds and magnificent terracotta pots — convolvulus, plumbago, agapanthus, lavender, rosemary, geraniums and oleanders predominate.

The huge pool, lined with marble, is sunk in a lawn smooth as a billiard table and shaded by olive trees and ample umbrellas. Below is a valley of oak trees and pines, still filled with birdsong and swallowtail butterflies in early July, and views of the mountains beyond. There are three sheltered bowers for guests who wish to read quietly or just meditate alone, and changing rooms, tastefully in keeping with the ragstone walls



Above: the dining room, where the housekeeper and cook, Rita, serves traditional Italian food. Right: one of the six 'splendidly hedonistic' main bedrooms, with en suite bathroom



The pool, lined with marble, is sunk in a lawn smooth as a billiard table and shaded by olive trees

that line the estate, housing a shower room and a refrigerator for cold drinks. For those who just want to stroll, still within the boundary of the estate, there is a delightful woodland alley which describes a half-circle, returning to the terrace below the house.

By dinner time our guests had turned up by their various routes: Palazzo Parisi is just about reachable in two days by car via the Channel Tunnel, and one intrepid traveller came by train, through Paris and Milan. After prosecco on the terrace, we were summoned into the dining room by Rita for the first of a series of classic Italian dishes (she prepared everything, including breakfast and lunch) that outstripped any restaurant I had enjoyed in Rome in recent years: her *osso bucco* and *fettuccine al sugo* were particularly superb. The arrangement was ideal: Rita had a quantity of menus we chose from on the previous day, and we bought our

own wine from Rieti or the excellently stocked supermarket four miles distant.

How did we get on? Well, there was the talkative artist, who never missed an opportunity to instruct us on the art of appreciating the Italian landscape; the magazine editor who spent rather too much time practising his catastrophic Italian on Rita; the young woman who changed her swimsuit every day; and who infuriated her sibling who had brought only one; the couple who were always half an hour late for dinner; and the old fellow who declined to buy any gin yet drank half a bottle of the stuff every day.

The fact was, though, that a house the size of Palazzo Parisi, with its studied comforts and civilised rhythms, its scope for solitude and gregariousness, its tranquil beauty — outside and in — made for the most perfect holiday I had ever experienced.

The late Robert Lush, one of the most revered hotel designers in the world, defined true luxury as "the total absence of irritation". Palazzo Parisi was precisely that. It smoothed our idiosyncrasies and rough edges to make us a perfectly delightful party. Our paying guests filled their days with trips to Rome (50 minutes by train from Rieti), sturdy walks along well-marked footpaths in the mountains, painting and testing by the pool.

There was something for everybody: a library of information on local history and attractions, videos, a gigantic television and a telescope to study the Italian night sky. For the religious there was a church built into the side of the palazzo and attended on Sundays by the villagers. The parish priest, however, an imposing Ethiopian, has a taste for thundering hellfire sermons.

It is, of course, a truism that shared holidays can be tricky, but one hopes that the

evident advantages — spending quality time with people you love — will outweigh the tensions. It helps if the holiday villa offers every service found in a luxury hotel, including the provision of meals. Palazzo Parisi has all that, plus ample means of escape.

In terms of cost, however, it proved to be not a tenth of the price of a hotel. During the season of our stay, late June to early July, the cost per head was about £300 (including Rita's cooking), plus the cost of food and wine from the shops. My only regret has been my undertaking to share this unbelievable find with my readers. ■ Palazzo Parisi, which accommodates 12 guests, can be rented exclusively through villa specialists CV Travel. Weekly rental in low season costs from £2230, rising to £4850 in July and August. Included in the rental are the services of a cook/housekeeper and maid. Tel: 0171-591 2811