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Stunning gardens, on-site cooks and sumptuous suites: inside the best Italian palazzos for hire

If you are seeking old-world comfort in an ancient setting, these properties are heavenly,

It could be that the secret to an idyllic life is having an excellent garden and cook. Plus, a spacious house on a hillside, cooled in summer by health-giving breezes. Plus, a village at the front door and acres of pleasure grounds to explore at the back.

If this sounds rather medieval that's because it is: [Palazzo Parisi](#) presides over Oliveto, a village that dates from at least the 11th century, and it is a fully-functioning feudal affair. In the foothills of the Apennine Mountains, north of Rome, the palazzo is the childhood home of the Anglo-Italian garden designer Arabella Lennox-Boyd, whose Scottish nanny used to deliver babies in the village while her mother, Signora Parisi, made sure that everyone was all right. "It's very much my mother's place," says Lady Lennox-Boyd. "She was a kind of icon here. I get lovely old ladies coming up to me and bursting into tears, in memory of her."

Now, the “huge” house is rented out during the summer holidays (until the end of October). Over the years Arabella has introduced not only electricity and bathrooms but other modern conveniences to the property, such as a swimming pool, installed in what was a field, about 100 metres from the house.



An aerial view of the palazzo

As her garden design star began to rise in England – where she moved in the mid-1960s – the empty space between house and pool became a glorious garden. and work has

became a glorious garden, and work has never stopped since. Arabella has no trouble in matching achievement to her vision, having won six gold medals at the Chelsea Flower Show, as well as 'Best-in-Show'.



Guests who stay at Palazzo Parisi arrive having made a conscious choice of seeking out old-world comfort in an ancient setting, over ‘experiences’ offered by exclusive hotels. Instead of booking a lesson in pasta-making, there is Rita the cook, who does this naturally – and the house is a dream for parents, who wish that their children would do more exploring, like they used to.

“All of my ladies are very good with children,” says Arabella. “It’s perfect for running around; there is a wonderful feeling of freedom that I remember as a child.” She also remembers making do: “Every bit of land was used for cultivating; there was no luxury. Just nature and farming.”



The salon features an 18th century fresco

It is comforting to know that somewhere in the world, old certainties still exist, and this feeling of safety begins at Rome airport (“unbelievably well-organised” says Arabella). Local people are self-motivated to wear masks at all times. Villages are unspoiled, restaurants are good.

“It’s real Italy, which is why we love it so much,” Arabella says. “People like the space,

and the food, and the fact that it's not Tuscany," she adds mischievously. "There's a whole network of walks, into the hills and up into the mountains, which is amazing."



The pool was constructed in the former field | CREDIT: Alex Ramsay

Guests are welcome to live in a bubble of their choosing, and the palazzo is used to seeing the comings and goings of whatever services are required, from beauticians and therapists to classical musicians. A cook, two maids and a gardener are on hand, with an optional staff flat to further support the seven double bedrooms and six bathrooms.



A view of the house abutting the village of Oliveto

Although the installation of the original swimming pool marked the beginning of the garden's transformation, the expanded version is not, unusually, the main focal point of the grounds. Within the property's seven acres there is a vegetable garden, an olive grove and extensive woodland for pottering at one's leisure. In April and May, garden tour groups arrive to inspect the famous Lennox-Boyd borders, before the summer rentals begin.



Italian pencil cypress trees, roses, catmint and verbena in the gardens

There is something wonderful about travelling to the same place every year and reconnecting with a much-loved region that feels like home. Better still to choose the same month, in the same place every year, for a real sense of continuity. “July is divine, September is wonderful,” says Arabella. Lunches, dinners and drinks take place in a number of gathering places, including a 70-foot loggia overlooking the Sabine hills or a terrace shaded by a crimson marquee. “It’s an idyllic life,” says Arabella, who declines to talk about the cost (price on application). “It’s very expensive.”