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IN SEARCH OF SOLITUDE

Sublime surroundings, sumptuous design and a personal touch: private villas have never been more appealing, thanks, in part, to the hotels that oversee them

By Claire Wrathall



Previous page: Castello di Reschio in Umbria, a sprawling estate with some 50 private farmhouses

Right: breakfast on the patio at Amanzoe's Villa Number 20 in Porto Heli, Greece

Last November, when a Swiss couple departed their home in Europe for Thailand to spend the winter at Amanpuri, the original Aman Resort in Phuket, they were not expecting to stay for six months. But then COVID-19 took hold and the lockdown happened. "We had to decide whether to stay in our villa there or go home," says Maria (who has asked not to be identified by her real name). "So I asked our staff whether they would stay with us." (All but two, she says, live out.) "We didn't know how long the lockdown would last, and they would not be able to leave the property. But all of them said they would stay, and in the end, we all had big fun: cinema evenings, cooking food from all over the world," while simultaneously running their financial advisory from Asia.

By the time they were able to leave Thailand, it was summer in Europe. So rather than go home to Switzerland, they flew to Greece. (If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that most of us who work in offices can work from anywhere.) Here they own another house at another Aman, this time Amanzoe on the Argolid peninsula in the Peloponnese, from where Maria is speaking by video call.

Like Amanpuri, where they bought an existing villa soon after the hotel opened in 1988, Amanzoe was designed by Ed Tuttle, one of the original Aman architects. "Ed is a good friend," she says, and he was instrumental in persuading them to build in Greece, a country they'd visited but hadn't hitherto thought they liked. Though such is the stupendousness of the villa, number 20, he created for them, that its location is almost beside the point.

First, there's its scale. It sleeps 18 guests – in addition to its owners, whose bedroom remains off limits when it's rented – in six 100sq m suites and three studios, all with their own terraces, some with plunge pools. "We intentionally made several master bedrooms so there wouldn't be difficult situations when a group of friends travels together," she says, acknowledging that renting it out was always part of the plan and that they'd deliberately built big because "there are not many villas on the market of this size".

Elsewhere there are 40m and 30m infinity pools, as well as an indoor one, a children's one and an expansive spa, gym and Pilates studio. There's a screening room, a little amphitheatre "in case you want the local choir to come and sing" and a den. "We have about 100 games, table football, pool, a jukebox," she notes, as well as garages for five cars, plenty of agreeable accommodation for guests' own entourages and security details. The ratio of permanent staff to guests is 1:1.

So far, so splendid, but it is also quite possibly the only rental in the world with its own funicular. "Well, you know we are Swiss," she jokes, pointing out that it was the most

practical way to link all six levels, which are staggered up a hillside, hence a succession of sublime sea views.

But they've preserved a palpable sense of place, too, not least in creating their "own little taverna", a huddle of brightly painted tables and chairs shaded by olive trees for those who wish to conjure a feeling of eating out without leaving the property. "We even have colourful lights if people want to make it a bit kitsch," she adds, stressing that they "made the house for ourselves and our friends". Only the bedrooms resemble those in the hotel, on the grounds that they simply couldn't be improved. Otherwise, Tuttle was careful to create, "something very personal, so it's not like a villa for rent", filled with works from their collection of art. (Their neighbours at No 37, a one-bedroom unit, have their very own James Turrell Skyspace.) "Even when there are just the two of us, it feels cosy," she adds.

In the wake of the pandemic, demand for such villas has become stronger than ever. Not for the first time had the international luxury travel agency network Virtuoso identified multigenerational family travel as this year's top trend, along with what its 2020 Luxe Report calls "group getaways: Gen Xers, boomers and older adults travelling to bond with friends". And then in June, a survey by the travel agency Abercrombie & Kent found that 85 per cent of its clients would only consider a villa holiday. We may still want to travel; we may still love hotels – but no one wants to mix with strangers anymore.

So villas attached to hotels have a special appeal, not just because they guarantee accommodation and service of a certain standard, but because, as Maria puts it, if you do change your mind and decide you want company, "you can still use the facilities of the hotel, which [in her case] is just two minutes away".

The past decades have seen numerous hotels diversify by adding villas to their estates, and it's not hard to see how they and the villas' owners benefit. As Penny Strawson, a real-estate agent specialising in the Caribbean, explains, "It's a win-win situation." For the buyer, a villa attached to a hotel is not just an investment and a holiday home, but one that effectively offers "effort-free ownership" because the hotel "will ensure your property is looked after", taking responsibility for security and maintenance, while also potentially offering an income stream if the owner chooses to rent it out, which the hotel will take care of as well. While for the hotel, in turn, each existing villa is a potentially valuable lucrative addition to its inventory and each potential one an effective way to leverage capital – hence the number of hotels that fund their construction through selling lots and residences off-plan. >



PHOTO VANGELIS PATERAKIS; PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHILIP VILE



The 12th-century Lismore Castle in Waterford, Ireland, part of Oetker's Masterpiece Estate collection

Before the pandemic, says Strawson, "rental returns were very much at the forefront of buyers' minds and set the price. But now people are much more concerned with finding the right property in the right place, somewhere they can spend holidays and keep themselves to themselves and be looked after by their own staff." They want personalised over "cookie-cutter design", not least because individuality "helps with resales, because buyers like to know they're getting a house that no one else has got".

Take Sugar Beach, a Viceroy Resort in Saint Lucia. There, no two villas or residences are identical. Some are "gingerbread" in style, recalling the island's colonial vernacular, others sleekly contemporary constructions of dark wood and glass so as not to stand out too boldly from the rainforest beyond. Designed by London architect Michaelis Boyd, lots vary from 600 to more than 2,500 square metres. Strawson also has lots at Cabot Saint Lucia on her books, a golf resort and 50-suite hotel expected to open in 2022, which is offering "three floorplan options",

but will equally allow buyers to bring in their own architects.

Over on Dominica, an island nation twice the size of Barbados with less than a fifth of its population and a tenth of its annual visitors – mostly thanks to the absence of an airport large enough for wide-body jets but able to accommodate the private jet set – Secret Bay is taking a more prescriptive approach with its new villas, which are crafted from Guyanese greenheart and perched high on stilts so that the living space is above the rainforest canopy to ensure views out to sea because, she explains, "it has very strict controls in terms of what they're trying to achieve in terms of their impact on the environment". In other words, they're a far cry from the bling of Sandy Lane on Barbados itself, on whose estate Tim and Kit Kemp, the owners of Firmdale Hotels, have a four-bedroom home, Rossferry, which they rent out. Its decor and atmosphere are a Caribbean-inflected riff on >

WHERE THE VILLAS CAME FIRST

If hotels have been expanding their offering by offering villa rentals, then Castello di Reschio in Umbria, just north of Perugia by the border with Tuscany, is an estate dotted with holiday homes that, early next spring, will open a hotel. Benedikt Bolza, an aristocratic Austrian-born architect, and his Florentine wife, Nencia Corsini, have spent the past 22 years restoring 50 or so traditional stone farmhouses on his family's undulating 1500ha domain, home to long-established vineyards (planted with cesanese, ciliegolo, sangiovese and merlot), 5,000 olive trees, 20 hives with two million bees (the honey is sublime) and an organic farm, as well as meadows, woods and a lake to swim or fish in. As each secluded house was completed and furnished in a timeless style that speaks of Bolza's interest in local crafts and materials, so it was sold, though 10 remain available for holiday lets. (Each has a pool of 12 to 20 metres.) Next came tennis courts and an equestrian centre and stud, catering to all levels from novice riders to doyens of dressage. Then a 70-cover restaurant was added. And now the estate's distinctive circular *castello*, where the family used to live, has metamorphosed into a hotel with another restaurant and spa. "The castle was just so incredibly suited to becoming a hotel," says Bolza. "It's over 1,000 years old, so we couldn't change anything, but we've managed to fit 36 rooms, most of them suites" around the huge round courtyard. "If you look at it today, you'd think it was always intended to be one." It will also be the culmination of a long-held ambition. "We've always been huge fans of well-run private country hotels that feel like private houses, where the staff are of the house and really dedicated to what they do," he says. "So it's been our dream to run a hotel and really be involved." Especially as, in appealing to couples and smaller groups, its market will widen. "A lot of people would love to come here, but don't need a house as big as the ones here" – most of which have at least five bedrooms. "The hotel will be a real asset for them." *reschio.com*

PHOTO CHRIS HILL / TOURISM IRELAND

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 WE MAY STILL LOVE HOTELS,
 BUT NO ONE WANTS TO MIX WITH STRANGERS ANYMORE –
 SO VILLAS ATTACHED TO HOTELS HAVE A SPECIAL APPEAL



Encircled by lush greenery, a cliff-top villa at Secret Bay, in Dominica

PHOTO COURTESY SECRET BAY

Kit's distinctive, exuberantly colourful style and a world away from Sandy Lane's trademark look, making them likely to appeal to devotees of Firmdale's own properties: think of London's Covent Garden or Haymarket Hotel, or New York's Crosby Street or Whitby.

But hospitality brands are diversifying into villa rentals in other ways, too. In 2014, the German management company Oetker Collection launched Eden Rock Villa Rental on St Barths, named after the island's hotel of that name. Offering minimum five-night stays in more than 140 homes across the island, they promise "all the privacy of a villa holiday but with five-star hotel service, from concierge to beach butlers" – not to mention breakfast, which hotel staff deliver fresh each morning.

Such has been its success that it also represents a small portfolio of what Oetker calls Masterpiece Estates, historic properties – some of them castles – in the UK and Ireland, a venture, says the Oetker Collection's overall CEO Tino Gruenert, that grew out of a meeting he attended at Glen Affric in the Scottish Highlands.

A baronial hunting lodge set within more than 4,000 hectares, it belongs to the owners of Eden Rock St Barths. And although Gruenert was there on business, he and his colleague were struck by what he calls the "magic" of the place; not just the beauty of its setting and its loch, but the fact that it was a family home, a place that had developed and evolved over time, filled with character. "Nothing felt fake," he says, praising the resident staff who'd served the family for years and the all-pervading atmosphere of authenticity. "It's not easy to describe." And it occurred to them that this was a type of vacation home their hotels' clients might enjoy, too.

Of course, such houses are very difficult to find. "Many castles in the world are rundown." (Historic homes tend to be formidably expensive to maintain, let alone decorate and staff to Oetker's standards.) And it's even harder "to find and create a business model around them, which is a shame". But tireless research has led them to sign up eight such historic properties, among them Kinross House, which the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe, called the "most beautiful house perhaps in all Britain" when he visited in 1726; and Lismore Castle, which belongs to the Earl and Countess of Burlington, dates back to the 12th century and has, over time, played host to an extraordinary roll call of guests, among them John F Kennedy, and Fred Astaire, both of whose sisters married into the family that owns it. Each property is hosted, if not by the owners, then a similarly well-connected and knowledgeable figure who will be on hand

to organise a raft of country pursuits, from shooting and deerstalking to waterskiing and paddleboarding. And lest the logistics of reaching somewhere so isolated confounds you, Oetker has partnered with the Sparfell Aviation Group to offer private charters to transport your party door-to-door to its properties from any airport in the world.

Oetker may have just nine hotels in Europe and the Americas, but even major global operators have been muscling into the homestay market. In 2016, Accor acquired the British home-sharing platform Onefinestay, massively extending its offering, which now covers the world, from urban sanctuaries everywhere from London to Sydney (not to mention apartments in The Ritz-Carlton Club, the Hyatt Grand and St Regis Residences) to beach houses in Turks and Caicos, the South of France and Hawaii.

So perhaps it was inevitable that the world's largest hotel conglomerate, Marriott International, would also venture into villas. Launched last year, its platform Homes & Villas by Marriott International now advertises more than 5,000 "highly curated offerings from beachfront bungalows, sprawling villas, cosy cabins and characterful townhouses" in 150 countries.

But Airbnb should not be losing sleep. As Marriott's Jennifer Hsieh, global leader of Homes & Villas, puts it, its objective is to give those members of its Bonvoy loyalty programme with more points than they feel they'll ever be able to spend on business travel a wider range of options with which to take their families on holiday.

In any case, the original home-sharing platform counts several hoteliers among its hosts. Devotees of Le Sirenuse, the fabled hotel in Positano on Italy's Amalfi Coast, who don't wish to risk proximity to fellow guests around its little pool or in its Michelin-starred restaurant might like to know that owners Antonio and Carla Sersale also have a very private three-bedroom house in the town, Villa degli Oleandri with even better sea views, that they let from time to time through Airbnb and Booking.com.

The French-born, Swiss-domiciled businessman Michel Reybier, whose assets include La Réserve, the small but perfectly formed portfolio of hotels in Paris, Geneva, Zurich and Ramatuelle, near St-Tropez, also rents out what he calls the "family home" he built at his vineyard, which just happens to produce Cos d'Estournel, the great St-Estèphe "super second" Bordeaux. The original château, a fantastical creation of pagodas, bells and giant iron spike-studded mahogany doors, a gift from the Sultan of Zanzibar, and surely the most eccentric in France, contains >

ON THE RADAR

These villa-forward resorts – either brand new or yet-to-open – promise supreme seclusion in far-flung locales. The recent expansion of **One & Only** across the globe extends in November to the west coast of Mexico, where the **One & Only Mandarin** (oneandonlyresorts.com/mandarina) offers cliff-top villas amid tropical forests, while next year in Greece, **One & Only Kéo** (oneandonlyresorts.com/kea-island) will offer 75 villas plus a number of residences for sale. Also in the Med, **Rocco Forte's Verdura** (roccofortehotels.com) in Sicily is adding new villas, while **Six Senses Shaharut** (sixsenses.com) will open in December in Israel's Negev Desert, which the villas are designed to blend into. On the other side of the world, the newly opened **Hoshinoya Okinawa** (hoshinoya.com/okinawa) has four private villas on site, and the wonderfully eco-friendly **Bawah Reserve** (bawahreserve.com) in Indonesia is expanding its offerings on a new island, Elang, with a clutch of new villas.

Inside the Jacques Garcia-designed La Chartreuse de Cos d'Estournel, near Bordeaux



ADDRESS BOOK

Amanpuri & Amanzoe
aman.com

Sugar Beach,
 A Viceroy Resort
viceroyhotelsandresorts.com

Cabot St Lucia
cabotstlucia.com

Secret Bay
secretbay.dm

Rossferry
rossferrybarbados.com

Oetker Collection
 Masterpiece Estates
oetkercollection.com

Onefinestay
onefinestay.com

Homes & Villas
 by Marriott International
homes-and-villas.marriott.com

Villa degli Oleandri
sirenuse.it

La Chartreuse
 de Cos d'Estournel
estournel.com

Owner's Cabin
62.no

Coral Caye, Sofia's
 Beach House & Roman's
 Lagoon Bungalow
thefamilycoppolahideaways.com

the chai, the store where the wine is kept during the vinification process and reposes in barrels prior to bottling.

The only place to stay when Reybier bought the site was a modest cottage, so he commissioned a manor house, La Chartreuse de Cos d'Estournel, a long, low L-shaped structure of honey-coloured stone with oeil-de-boeuf windows and fancy corbels that looks as though it's been there for centuries. Reybier hired Jacques Garcia, designer of, among many stellar hotels, La Réserve, one of the finest of Paris's palaces, to work his magic on the interiors.

Of course, there are only so many weeks of the year he can use it, so the rest of the time it is let, and paying guests have the run of its enfilade of reception rooms, with their ornately carved blackened Rajasthani doors and architraves, Ziegler rugs, gold-embossed Cordovan-leather walls and casually strewn Hermès blankets; six bedrooms; a basement spa, hammam and indoor pool. Only the locked wine cellar, cooled to an optimum 13°C, is behind bars and off limits, and no wonder: it is packed not just with bottles of Cos dating back to 1887, but also most of the great grands vins de Bordeaux: Latour, Margaux, Haut-Brion, Lafite, Mouton Rothschild, Cheval Blanc, Yquem – which may be available for a price.

In comparison, the three-bedroom Owner's Cabin on the Norwegian island of Giske is a homestead that belongs to the owner of the hotel group 62° Nord, an essay in cool, exquisitely styled Scandinavian minimalism that – in keeping with the Law of Jante, the Nordic code of modesty – may strike you as lacking in extravagant luxuries. But that would be to miss the point, for here it is *hytte kultur* – literally cottage culture – one comes to experience, a simpler way of life (made easier still by the optional services of a private chef) that brings

you closer to nature: in this case in a fjord visited by orcas, facing the snow-covered Sunnmøre Alps.

For real isolation, however, there's also Francis Ford Coppola's Coral Caye in Belize. The jungle-cloaked islet of just under a hectare is protected by a vast reef where whale sharks congregate at full moon between April and June and you have a better chance than almost anywhere in the world of spotting a manatee.

A little over 12 kilometres offshore from Turtle Inn, the loveliest hotel on the Placencia peninsula in southern Belize and one of his six Family Coppola Hideaways, the cay has just three rustic structures and is not for the faint-hearted. There may be solar-powered electricity, but don't expect en-suite bathrooms or much in the way of hot water. Three days is the recommended length of a stay.

If that sounds too much like roughing it, there are more conventionally comfortable options back on the mainland, notably Sofia's Beach House, an elegant modernist tropical villa with two guest bungalows commissioned by Coppola's Oscar-winning film-director daughter from the French architect Laurent Derou, whose work she'd encountered while shooting a scene in *Lost in Translation* in the APC store in Tokyo's Harajuku district, which he designed.

Or if there are just the two of you, and your children don't mind bunk beds, her filmmaker brother Roman's Lagoon Bungalow is another alluring, if much smaller, more laid-back option in the compound. Each is a secluded private home – and both, it goes without saying, are suffused with a kind of by-association character and cool that ordinarily money can't buy. Yet if you crave access to a spa, dinner at one of several restaurants, a cocktail or just a gelato, all are only a matter of minutes away. In short, like so many of the hotel-adjacent villas around the globe, they're the best of both worlds. ♦