



Countryside Vacations

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Countryside VacationsSM Newsletter

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The Insider's guide to renting Europe's cottages, castles, and villas

Holiday 2003

Countryside Vacations

is a newsletter that describes everything you need to know about a unique style of travel called "self-catered" vacations. Each issue is packed with information, including:

- Reviews of rental agencies
- Reviews of rental properties in Europe, plus contact information
- Reviews of restaurants and shops in the European countryside
- Stories from travelers about their own experiences in Europe's lesser-traveled back roads and villages, places often left out of the guide books
- Tips on how to make the most of your self-catered vacation—what to look for in a rental property, what to ask before you book a property, what to bring with you.

Subscribe today, and join the savvy travelers who share your desire to explore the untouristed byways of Europe at a leisureed pace. We look forward to sharing our experiences with you.

RENTAL COMPANY REVIEW

Value at Any Price

Service and quality are unmatched at this outstanding company.

This excellent Maine-based company is, from our perspective, pretty close to perfection. Clients rave about the service, the selection is top-notch, and the detailed knowledge the staff has about almost every single property it represents—literally inside and out—is unparalleled. Even if you don't need a lot of hand-holding, working with Suzanne B. Cohen and Associates to arrange your rental virtually guarantees a fabulous vacation experience.

It's a bit of a stretch from public television to European rentals, but Suzanne Cohen, founder of her eponymous five-person company, made just that leap. "I'd worked for TV for about 22 years and I decided I wanted to get out to where there was daylight," Cohen laughs. "I was in Europe taking a half-year sabbatical, and while I was there a friend asked me to call a friend who was in the business. I was looking for another life, and it all came together."

Cohen began representing

the firm the friend worked for in the United States in 1989. But soon she began to realize that the offerings of that company, which was based in the United Kingdom, didn't always match up with what her American clients were seeking in a rental. So she began scouting out individual properties in Italy to create her company's own private collection. Two years later she and the British firm parted ways, and Cohen added properties in Great Britain and Ireland by representing the firms Elegant Ireland and Rural Retreats.

Today, Cohen's private collection of Italian properties encompasses 64 in the Tuscany region plus 14 more across Umbria (6), Veneto (3), Lazio (2), Liguria (2), and Friuli (1)—and many of these properties are made up of several apartments, for a total of about 210 different rental options in Italy.

The two catalogs add about 400 properties in Great Britain and another 75 or so in Ireland. "One has really incredibly well-priced properties—very simple cottages with a unique personality, all selected very carefully with comfort and charm in mind—that are so incredibly reasonable that they're booked a year in advance," Cohen observes.

"The other company has houses that are more elegant—castles and exceptional houses for a very select clientele. One is \$103,000 a week."

Almost all the Italian properties are quite pricey, going for more than \$500 per person per week in the high season, but bargains can

Villa Bella Vista, Tuscany



be found, particularly in the houses that sleep fewer people and in the off-season.

All prices include heat and electricity, but the British properties have the added charm of a picnic hamper, so when they first walk in the door, clients find a basket of staples including eggs, cheese, butter, wine, and bread. "We're just like small children when we get there—we want to see what's in the hamper," Cohen laughs. "It's such a warm, wonderful welcoming. Then there's usually a fire all

ready to go; you just have to put a match to it. The British get it in a big way.”

Cohen says that owners of Italian properties come to her hoping to be added to her list. “We are approached by probably a hundred or more people a year offering us their houses. From that group we usually select around 12 or 14,” she says. “We really take only what need to round out what we already have.”

Any property that joins the list must have certain essentials: “We look for comfort in all kinds of ways. Mattresses shouldn’t look like they’ve been through several wars. We look for things that smell good, quite honestly. Some of these houses are 600 years old, but they can’t smell moldy, and there shouldn’t be a farm too close by when the wind blows. Historic value is nice, but it’s not essential. We look for value for the money.”

Cohen also makes suggestions to property owners: “We encourage screens on the windows. And Italian culture doesn’t dictate a lamp beside every chair or bed. Sometimes it’s a hard sell.”

Cohen says she is not afraid to let go of properties that have not been kept up. “Sometimes owners feel that their house should rent for more than we feel it should, or maintenance isn’t kept up, or another property comes along that may be a step up—not necessarily price-wise, but in terms of quality. But whatever it is, it should be a good value no matter what the price is.”

The level of service Cohen’s company offers is extraordinary. “We’re known as being a high-touch company. We spend a lot of time with each client,” she says, and past

clients vouch for that fact without reservation.

But perhaps the most astonishing lengths the company goes to is the fact that Cohen and her staff spend an enormous amount of time at almost every property they represent—not just visiting for an hour or two, but actually staying at least one night. “All or most of us on the staff have slept in most of the houses,” she says. “We stay in as many as we can as possible. We go to Great Britain every winter and see properties, and that number can vary, but usually it’s about 70 to 80. That’s what makes us different from the other rental companies out there. We really can tell you which way the wind blows.”

As an example, she mentions former clients who were interested in literature. “They wanted to stay in houses that had some sort of connection to authors. We were able to pick six of them—including a house that Thomas Hardy’s mother was born in—so they could do this literary tour. Those kinds of things are possible. We may not know all the answers, but we know where to get them.”

While the company does not offer plane tickets, it can arrange a car, a phone, and pretty much anything else—chefs, drivers, tour guides, photographers, even a concierge who will be at your beck and call. “We have people we work with in Italy,” she notes. “We spend a lot of time cultivating these contacts. If you want to go hot-air ballooning, we can arrange it. We had a group of 26 from Canada, and we arranged for them to have 26 bicycles at their house. Some people do require a great deal of TLC.”

In particular, affianced couples considering a wedding abroad should not go it alone, Cohen declares. “We have a wedding planner on our site,” she says. “Getting married in Italy is not for sissies. To get married in a church, there’s a 30-day residency rule; otherwise it’s ten days. It’s hard work. You really need a professional to help you, and we have one.”

Cohen and her staff also help clients understand the differences between staying at a hotel and renting a home for their vacation. “We do have to prepare people,” she says. “When you’re in another country, you will experience cultural differences. We don’t want clients to be shocked when the church bell rings at four in the morning.”

The company sends every client a packet that includes information about the house they are renting and, if they are traveling to Italy, a restaurant list. “We have worked diligently on that list for years,” Cohen declares. “We also include a four-paged essay about the different regions and the differences between them—what herbs are used in the food, what you will find on the menu. We send information about what time you check in to your house, what time you’re expected to leave, and reminders like don’t forget to buy toilet paper on your way to your house.”

The company’s web site has much to recommend it. It is beautiful and easy to navigate. The photographs are gorgeous; photos of properties at rental sites in general are usually pretty dicey, but across the board, the photos of Cohen’s Italian properties are the best we’ve seen anywhere.

Because they come from a catalog, the English and Irish properties are dealt with pretty superficially—just the name, location, number of people it accommodates, and a couple of photos are given. They’re listed in alphabetical order, but not every property is on the site. “We have a sampling online, but the catalogs are the main source. The properties change too frequently,” Cohen explains.

Italian properties, which are not listed in a printed catalog, are written up much more comprehensively. Those in Tuscany are further broken down into type of residence—apartment, single residence house, and multi-residence house. Next comes a list of the properties that includes the name, price range, number of people it sleeps, and a paragraph-long description (the nearest town would be helpful here, but is not given).

Click on a property name and you’ll get a longer description, a button to click for a decent map, and a button for more excellent pictures. The property descriptions also include something we’ve never seen anywhere else—the option of clicking back to the country, region, or property description, which is very handy and saves a lot of tapping on the back button.

Under Italy is an “Italy Information and Links” button that offers up a good list of resources, including a FAQs page, special events, antiques markets, Florence museums, and general links. This kind of page is where inattention to detail is usually revealed, but we could find none here—all links are up to date—except they do list the phone number for TWA, a defunct airline.

Under the Catalog button is a link to a page called “What to do when you receive your catalogs,” which should be required reading for anyone looking for a property, whether the catalog be printed or online.

In truth, the only fault we can find with this company is that it can be a bit difficult to find properties with the characteristics you’re looking for on the web site. It has no search engine, so you must scroll through the list of properties—and perhaps click to the longer description of each one—to find what you’re after. Beyond that, we wish prices were spelled out more clearly—though a quick phone call will provide you with the answer you’re looking for—and also listed on the longer property description.

But the bottom line is that this fantastic company has great properties and outstanding customer service. Certainly if you have the money to spend, but even if you’re a bargain hunter, this is a company that is not to be missed. We’ve not seen one better.

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Countries: Italy, England, Ireland
Concentrations: Tuscany
Pricing: Most \$500+ per person, per week, high season
Additional offerings: car rentals, cell phone rentals
Catalog: Online and printed
Credit cards: Visa and MasterCard

CV RATING ● ● ● ● ●

REVIEWS

I have rented properties in Italy on five different occasions from Suzanne Cohen and her colleagues. They’re the best! In 1998, when I wanted to rent a house in Tuscany, I contacted them and spoke with Diane Robertson. What really impressed me was that she listened to me. She listened to what I wanted and where I wanted to be, and we worked together to find the right property. I said, “It has to be beautiful. It has to be above average.” I got exactly what I expected. I’ve never been disappointed in any of the properties I’ve rented from them. And I’m pretty picky!

Suzanne and her associates take a personal interest in me and my family, and they are always anxious to hear about our trip when we return. It has been a pleasure working with them. I hope to do so again soon.

**KATHY BALLOU
NEWTON, MASS.**

I work with Diane Robertson, who is the other principal in the business. They really know the places they’re renting. They also know the area well, and you’re not surprised when you get there. They’re able to tell you precisely where it’s located and what’s around there.

Our experiences have been wonderful. Everything has been very reliable and worked as it should. They are very pleasant to work with. They’re just fun.

**ROBERT L. GABLE
ANDOVER, MASS.**

We have a lot of confidence in Suzanne. Her places are exactly what you want them to be. Her strongest suit is fitting clients to the right property. They ask a lot of questions about what you’re looking for and what kinds of things you want to do.

She has a list of restaurant recommendations, and the ones that we have tried have been

good. The list has a variety of different types of restaurants: family-type restaurants crowded with locals—which I think speaks well of the food—and some places that are fancy, too. It’s been a great experience. We’re looking forward to more of them.

**DAVID MURRAY
FALMOUTH, MAINE**

I saw her ad, and when I called and spoke with her, I had a good feeling right away. We have young children, and many friends with children would be visiting during our stay. She made some good recommendations based on our needs. She had visited all the properties and could tell us firsthand about their features. She had visited the properties we were most interested in and knew a lot about the people who owned them.

The first time we rented from her, I was a little concerned whether the house would meet our high expectations. We’re investing time and money to move our family over there for a period of time, so it has to be right. I can honestly say that the experience each time has exceeded our expectations.

Suzanne speaks with candor and she gives straight answers, and I’ve found that to be a real positive. My sense is that she is very particular and has high standards. She really wants her clients to be thrilled with their experience.

**BILL BRADY
WESTON, MASS.**

They’ve been great. I’ve rented personally on a number of occasions and have taken large groups of friends over there. A few years ago some friends and I took a group of 25 friends over for a week. I called Suzanne, and she worked with me diligently to find the right property. Sometimes we’d spend hours on the phone over the course of a few days. She even told me about idiosyncrasies with the property.

She’s very good about making sure that you go in with your eyes wide open.

**BRENT CROOK
SEATTLE, WASH.**



It was my husband who wanted to rent a house in Italy, but it was so easy. The whole experience was positive. The fact that she goes and personally stays in these properties and suggests what the owners need to do to make them better is important. She told the owners of the house we rented to update the linens before we came. She knows what’s going on.

Suzanne is friendly, but not overly so. We e-mailed most of the time, but I called occasionally. We had to change the dates of our stay, and she was able to do that with a minimum of hassle. She’s able to satisfy your needs in a way that doesn’t feel like you’re asking too much. She’ll spend all the time that you want on the phone, and I got prompt answers to my questions. I have total confidence in her. She’s very professional, and I really like her style.

**SHARON TOREN
NORTH PLAINS, ORE.**

They don’t just talk. They listen to what you want, and they match what you want with what they have. We went for the first time with the entire family, which was two grandchildren and three children and spouses. I was coordinating it all, so I was very anxious. Suzanne made it so easy. She was terrific. There were no surprises. She tells you the truth—what she said, you got. I only wish she had properties in other parts of Italy.

**ARLEEN WEINER
PHOENIX, MD.**