

Italy With *La Bambina Bellissima*

I'm as cautious as the next person when it comes to unnecessarily spending money right now. No more willy-nilly impulse purchases. The same goes for travel — except that when I thought about the upcoming first birthday of the youngest member of our family, I felt strongly that this occasion should be celebrated in Italy.

I know that sounds incongruous, but my roots are in Italy (see our April issue) and the birthday girl's mother is Italian by proxy — having spent her junior year of college in Florence. The thought of sharing my favorite food, music, and sites with my favorite people was just too irresistible.

Luckily (although I didn't think so at the time), a recent remodel had bloated my credit card statements, simultaneously adding

copious miles to my American AAdvantage balance. Five tickets to Milan? *No problema.*

The “where to stay?” question took longer to resolve. We all thought a villa in Tuscany would be ideal, but if you Google “Tuscany villa rental,” you'll see why choosing was a challenge. In the end, we took the advice of multiple friends who had booked through Parker Villas and were very happy with the results.

Parker Villas doesn't offer as many rental homes as some companies, but they maintain close relationships with the owners and can therefore offer a predictable experience.

I also liked that one agent handled our booking from start to finish. In fact, I was impressed with how often Roberta called

during the process of picking a property and making arrangements. In addition to Parker's U.S. office, Parker Italia provides on-the-ground support for travelers. (www.parkervillas.com)

Villa Mezza Luna, located in Radda in Chianti — midway



Colle Bereto Winery is located just outside of Radda in the heart of the Chianti region

between Florence and Sienna — had all the amenities we requested: A/C (which we didn't use), window screens (important), a large pool (wonderful), laundry facilities (essential), six bikes, three bedrooms, three bathrooms, and a very well-equipped kitchen.

We hadn't counted on a shaded patio surrounded by large pots of colorful flowers, where we enjoyed long, leisurely meals and lots of great conversation. These talks reminded me of something I read in one of Frances Mayes' books: “In a foreign country, we see each other in an unfamiliar perspective, which can heighten and enrich the closeness we already have.”

Mezza Luna's owners live next



La Bambina's first birthday was a memorable occasion

door and welcomed us with fruit off their trees and a nice bottle of local Chianti Classico. While they were never intrusive, it was nice to have friends nearby.

I was immediately glad we'd passed on the more palatial options. For a week, Villa Mezza Luna was our home, complete with scattered toys, books, and laundry drying in the sunshine. While we enjoyed our excursions to Colle Bereto Winery, Villa Vignamaggio (where *Much Ado About Nothing* was filmed), and nearby hill towns, I always looked forward to turning into our drive where the stone villa, lush lawn, and cool pool awaited.

I also was very pleased that we were in picturesque Radda, surrounded by vineyards and olive trees, and not in a more touristy town. Our village offered everything we needed, including a gelateria, where the staff served our youngest her first Italian ice cream and shared our excitement.

"Bellissima bambina," they called out to her, as we paraded in for

Rustic stone buildings with red tile roofs are interspersed across the quilt-like Chianti countryside



our daily dose of gelato in a rainbow of flavors and colors. In fact, I think our family of five felt more welcome everywhere we went in Italy because she was with us. (Or were we with her?) "Ciao," young and old would call out as we passed by.

Parker Villas offers maid service and personal chef service, but that seemed a trifle extravagant. Instead, *la bambina's* parents offered to "team cook" dinner if we would keep an eye on her while they were in the kitchen. This arrangement resulted in great meals and really happy grandparents.

Our one splurge was the birthday dinner, where we opted to have our landlord's daughter-in-law, a professional chef, prepare pizza in the authentic brick oven on their patio. Our "team cooks" watched the whole lengthy process of making the

dough from scratch, while Granddad had a swim and I relaxed with a good book.

The party started with various kinds of bruschetta, focaccia topped with stracchino cheese, and homemade pâté served on crostini. Then, made-to-order pizzas followed with the lightest crust I have ever experienced — each one different and delicious. The chef's cute young daughters helped serve, and her husband was in charge of sliding the pizzas in and out of the oven. It was a real family affair, and we all loved it — especially our *bambina bellissima*, who stayed awake just long enough to blow out her first-ever birthday candle.

For more information on family travel in Italy, visit www.ranchandcoast.com and my Authentic Luxury Travel blog, which can be accessed via the Web site. ELIZABETH HANSEN

The living room at Villa Mezza Luna was quite tidy before we "decorated" with myriad toys, books, maps, and blankies

