

## TRAVEL NOTES

● **STAY** at 4-star hotels, Stonefield Castle or the Craigellachie Hotel for just £20.12 per night, including breakfast.

One of Scotland's best kept secrets, Stonefield Castle (below) is situated in 60 acres of beautiful woodland gardens and has spectacular views out over Loch Fyne. With its roaring open fires, four poster beds and spectacular seafood restaurant it makes the perfect place to hole up this winter.

The cosy Craigellachie Hotel located in the heart of Speyside has over half of the world's whisky distilleries on its doorstep making for a great boozy break. Whisky affiliates should also take advantage of the hotel's bar which has the largest collection of Scottish malt whisky, outside of private collectors, in the world with more than 750 on offer. Perfect for warming the cockles!



A one-off January 2012 offer at both Stonefield Castle and Craigellachie Hotel, has rooms at just £20.21 PP, Per Night (B&B) based on 2 people sharing and when staying a minimum of 2 nights. Valid until January 31, 2012, subject to availability. Stonefield SAVE over £139 per couple! Craigellachie SAVE over £69 per couple!

● **THERE'S** no doubt that the festive period is an expensive time of year so easyJet Holidays wants to help holidaymakers relieve the financial burden in January by giving them more flexibility about when they pay.

Until January 31 customers will be able to book a holiday departing during July or August 2012 with a low deposit from £50 per person, paying the balance just two weeks before departure — a move from the previous four week payment window.

For example, a customer spending £600 on a holiday for two people departing in July, could now be able to secure that holiday for £100 and will then only need to save as little as £20 per week for their summer break. Some major tour operators insist on final payment 12 or 14 weeks before departure, so the amount their customers need to save per week before they pay the balance could be double that.

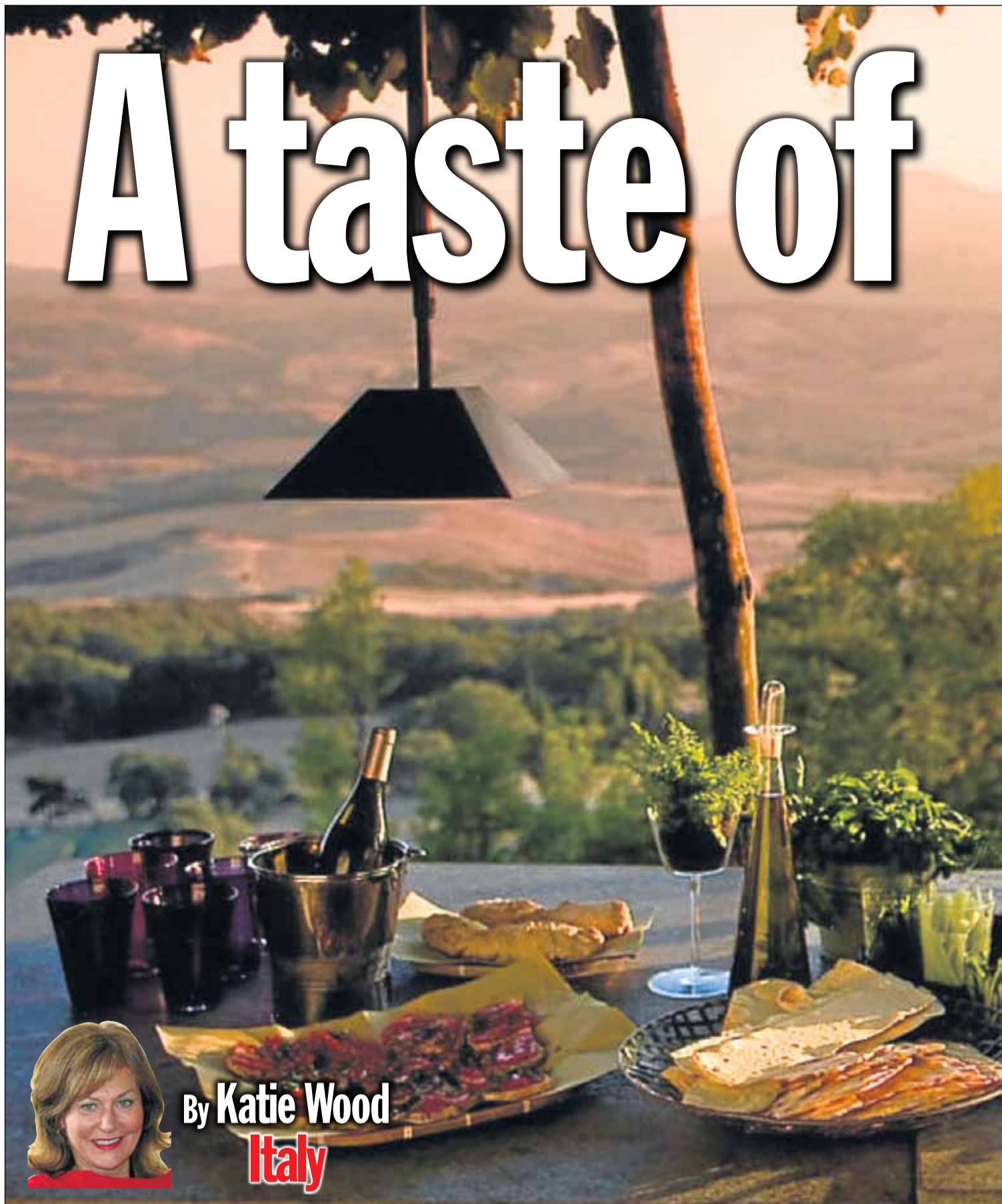
The easyJet Holidays website offers a range of city breaks, beach destinations and ski holidays, with a choice of flexible durations, star ratings and transfer options available. To book visit [easyjet.com/holidays](http://easyjet.com/holidays).



● **EARLY Bird Offer** — Save up to £70 off a UK summer holiday with Parkdean. Book before January 31 and save up to £70 off a UK holiday in July & August with Parkdean (0844 335 3348/[parkdean.com](http://parkdean.com)). Voted 'Best UK Holiday Park Operator 2010 & 2011', discover Parkdean's 24 award-winning holiday parks in beautiful coastal, country and woodland locations throughout the UK in Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Hampshire, Norfolk, South Wales and Scotland.

Discounted prices in peak school summer holidays start from £379 (saving £70) for a family of four for seven nights staying in a modern two-bedroom holiday home in Cornwall. This equates to under £95 per person.

# A taste of



By **Katie Wood**  
**Italy**

## A QUESTION I get asked at every party when meeting new people is, "So where is your favourite place in the world?"

It's such a hard question to answer, as obviously that totally depends on what type of holiday you seek, who you're going with, time of year, etc.

But when pushed to the limit, nine times out of 10 I come back to Tuscany. Why? Because it offers in abundance all the things I love: a rich history and vibrant culture, amazing architecture, sunshine, fabulous food and wine, art and music, and lovely people. The landscape is just so beautiful you can't help but fall under its spell.

In September last year a group of friends, my husband and I rented a villa there for a house-party to celebrate some milestone anniversaries, and I have to say that was about as close to paradise as it gets.

We stayed at a villa run by

Merrion Charles (see [merrioncharles.com](http://merrioncharles.com)) — a British travel consultant living in Tuscany with an encyclopaedic knowledge of that region and who offers superb villas all over Italy, but with especially wonderful ones in the stunning Val d'Orcia in southern Tuscany, where we chose to locate.

The reason for that was clear to our group from the time they opened the windows in the morning — it is just so totally unspoilt — not surprising as the whole valley is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The landscape's distinctive features are flat chalk plains out of which rise almost conical hills with fortified settlements on top — a terrain that has inspired countless artists.

Unspoilt Renaissance hill-top villages and towns such as Pienza, Monticchiello and Montepulciano are truly magical to visit. 15th Century churches, palaces, wine cellars, cheese shops, quality linen and leather shops — this is the Tuscany of

**LEADING** leisure airline Jet2.com offers low fares, great flight times, and a generous 22kg baggage allowance to Pisa from Newcastle Airport, up to 2 days a week.

Flights start from £31.99 one way including taxes.

For more information please visit [jet2.com](http://jet2.com)

your dreams. It's hard to choose one favourite but Pienza would have to be mine. The 1459 Palazzo here was the summer residence of Pope Pius 11, and is part of the monumental complex that includes the Cathedral and Square. No matter where you turn in these towns you are surrounded by sheer unadulterated beauty.

Siena, Perugia, Assisi and Florence are also within striking distance.

While the Val d'Orcia is a feast for your eyes, as our group found, staying in one of these catered villas is also a feast for your tastebuds. It'd be hard to make bad food with the fabulous fresh ingredients on offer in Tuscany (and let's not forget the excellent Chianti and other wines), but our resident cook Ivana excelled to such an extent that none of us went out for one

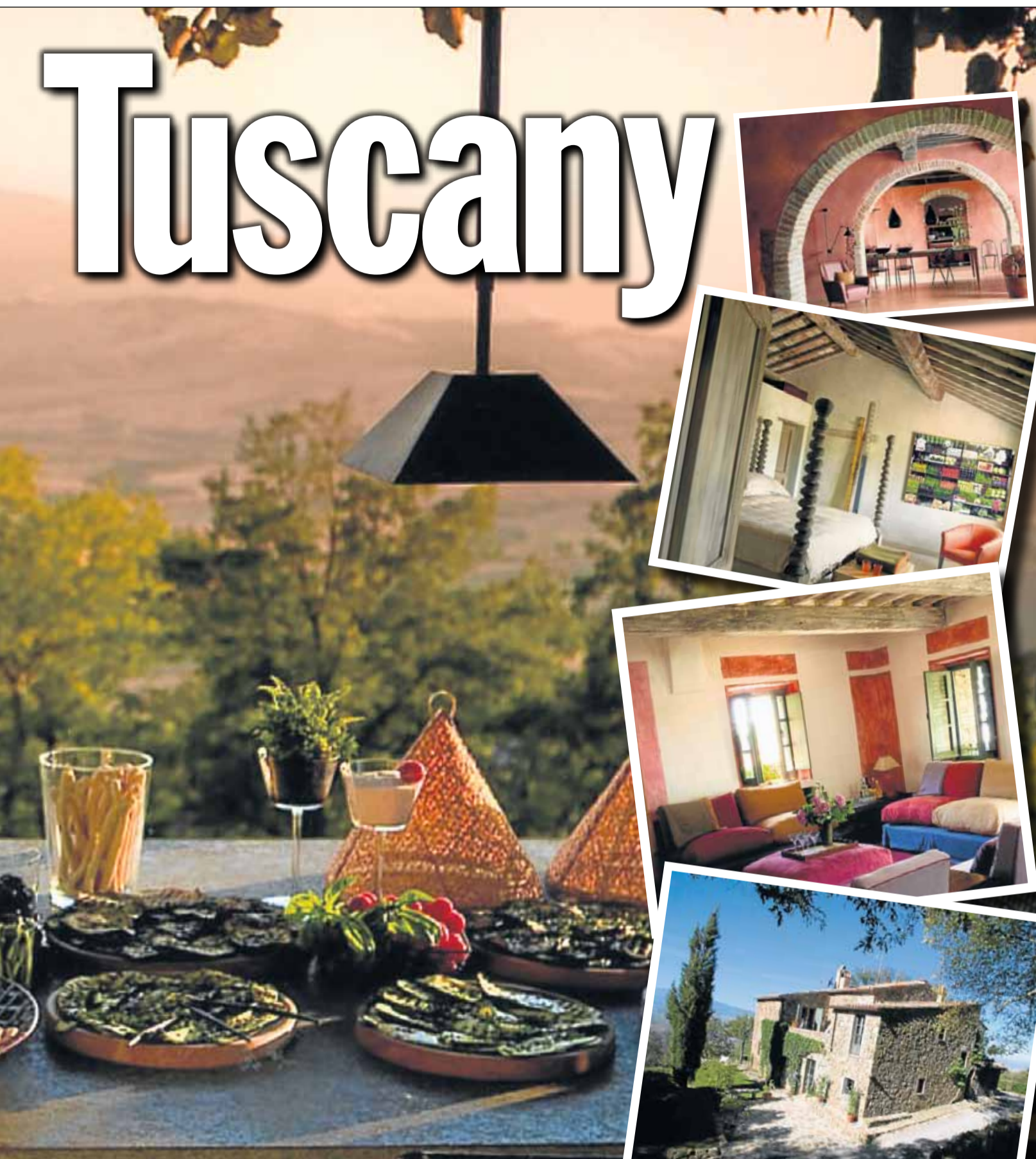
restaurant dinner. Why would you when she was producing sumptuous three course meals such as, to take one menu, mushroom risotto, wild boar casserole and Tiramisu for around £20 a head (with so much left over your lunch next day was taken care of).

Each dinner ended in a round of applause for her work, and the night we asked Luigi (who helped her) for pizza baked in the villa's own stone-bake outdoor oven, one of our group — an American who's a real gourmet — declared it the best pizza of his life.

I wouldn't disagree. Equally the Spaghetti Carbonara, T-Bone steaks on the outdoor BBQ and the panna cotta were eye-wateringly good.

Just chilling by the 20m infinity pool, overlooking fields, an olive grove and a 15th Century

# Tuscany



fortress, with absolutely no sound bar the birds, was utter bliss. Everyone commented that this was the most special place they had ever been — praise indeed for a multinational group of very experienced travellers . . .

Pre-dinner drinks taken in the hot tub surrounded by the immaculate vegetable garden and listening to The Godfather theme tune was also much favoured as a pastime.

If you get a good group together there is just nothing like a villa holiday. The staff at these villas are excellent and won't let you lift a finger. No bed making, no shopping for supplies, no cooking, they take instructions, you choose your menus, and, if you wish them to, they do the rest at very reasonable cost. Giorgio Miani's family own four out of the 14 villas in this area marketed by Merrion Charles. They are all meticulously restored and, as Ilaria, his wife, is a famous Italian interior designer, they are furnished with impeccable taste. Whether you have

a group of six or 20, there's a villa for you.

On one day we tore ourselves away to Agricola Fontanelle — a nearby 50 hectare farm worked by three brothers who each specialise in a different product (wine, olive oil and Sienese 'Cinta' — delicious organic pork). They offer a three-hour tour with an English-speaking guide explaining all about it, followed at the end with a wine tasting and a lunch at their home, all for £40. They only take one group at a time so there's no bus-tour mentality — this is custom-made for your needs, and a delightful way to get in touch with the countryside it is too.

See [azfontanelle.it](http://azfontanelle.it)  
If you're keen on this area (and how could you not be?) and have a large group, take a look at Villa Tombolino. A vast terrace surrounds the villa with several pergolas, patios and roofed dining areas from where one can enjoy 360° views of the valley and beyond.

With two living rooms and a dining room downstairs, and

a further living room upstairs, there's ample space for guests to relax, and for anyone who enjoys visiting Tuscany in the cooler months then two of the living rooms have open fireplaces in addition to underfloor heating throughout. All of the bedrooms are spacious and individually styled exceptionally comfortable beds.

This house sleeps 18. Prices from £6530 a week, but considering that's around £362 a head, that is remarkable value for the quality on offer.

If you want a villa for a smaller group, check out Zingoni which sleeps 10. Another stunner from £396 a head.

Trust me, I don't give out praise easily but this was one of the best experiences of my life.

**FOR more information contact Merrion Charles on 020 3326 1213, via email: [info@merrioncharles.com](mailto:info@merrioncharles.com) or log on to [www.merrioncharles.com](http://www.merrioncharles.com)**



■ Main picture and lower three above — views in and around Villa Zingoni.  
■ Top two pictures above — Villa Tombolino.

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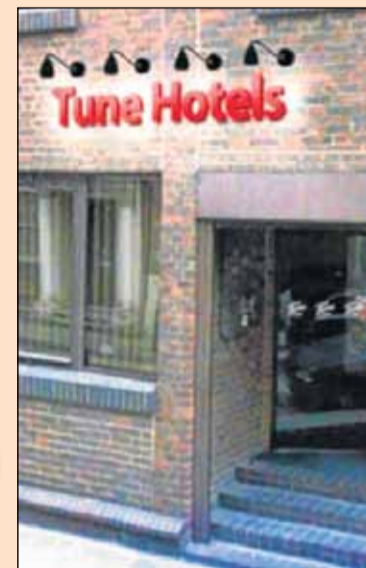
● **SAVVY** travellers looking for a low-cost hotel in London will be excited to hear that budget hotel chain Tune Hotels has opened its second London property — Tune Hotel Liverpool Street.

Located just 500 metres from Liverpool Street station, the new Tune property features 183 en-suite bedrooms, all of which are 20% larger than the bedrooms at its sister property. For the first time in the UK, Tune has introduced twin bedrooms to the Liverpool Street property.

As a limited service hotel consumers can expect low-cost rooms focused on high-quality basics — excellent beds, power showers, air-conditioned rooms, central locations, a clean environment and 24 hour security — with guests only paying extra for the facilities and services they use.

Bedrooms at Tune Liverpool Street will start from £35 a night and are available to book now.

For booking and more information about Tune Hotels UK visit [tunehotels.com/uk](http://tunehotels.com/uk)



● **LETTING** a spare room for just 22 nights a year will cover the cost of the average British holiday.

6.5m more tourists are expected in the UK this year compared to 2011 and many will be looking for short-term private rental accommodation.

Those offering spare rooms for short-term let earned on average £37 a night in 2011.

1 in 25 Brits have let out a spare room to help pay for a holiday abroad this year and by renting out a spare room for just 22 nights a year you can generate enough revenue to cover the cost of the average British holiday, according to research from travel accommodation website, [WhereToSleep.co.uk](http://WhereToSleep.co.uk).

Average rates were £43 per night at the peak of summer 2011 when demand was at its highest. A recent survey of more than 2000 people showed that we Brits spend £836 on the average holiday.

The majority of us (53%) use savings to cover the cost but with the day-to-day cost of living so high and interest rates so low saving can be a struggle.

Those who decided to rent out their entire property to holiday makers earned an average of £73 per night — £140 a night at the height of summer.

[Wheretosleep.co.uk](http://Wheretosleep.co.uk) links holiday-makers looking for accommodation and people with a spare room looking to generate additional income.

See their website for more information.