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# Why deny yourself?

**Umbria** The secluded splendour of Abbadia Celestina was once enjoyed only by monks. Now it's a great place for a party, says Harriet O'Brien. Photographs by Fergus Greer

ON A LATE SUMMER'S DAY, as the sunshine spread a golden haze over Umbria, a newly arrived group of friends from London drove up to the tiny village of Civitella Benazzone. Taking an unpromising, narrow turning, they trundled down a long woodland track – and found themselves in another world. Beyond a gate at the end of the lane, tremendous views unfolded across a picture-book, rolling landscape. A great patchwork of farmland stretched over distant hills, and immediately in front of the gateway well-tended lawns swept down from a stone farmhouse. Behind the house an ancient tower rose above a knoll of trees. Far away from any main road, this was a completely hidden haven with a breathtaking outlook: a dreamy setting for a house party.

Abbadia Celestina lies about 24km north of Perugia. As the name suggests, the property was originally a religious settlement. In 1064 building started on a monastery complex that took some 35 years to complete. It became a well-known spiritual centre, at least twice hosting St Francis of Assisi on his pilgrimage to nearby Gubbio. The abbey survived medieval battles and a major earthquake but was abandoned in the early 19th century and fell into decay. Today the religious buildings are a romantic ruin: the remains of several old walls stand on a tree-clad hillock beside the monastery's only complete surviving structure, a roofed tower dating back to the 11th century. Two hundred years ago, stone from the crumbling abbey buildings was expediently salvaged by a farmer, who used the material to build himself a home just below the old monastery. In keeping with local tradition, his animals – cattle and the odd sheep and mule – occupied the ground floor area while the farmer and his family lived in the storey above. The farmhouse and neighbouring barn are now a six-bedroom villa, fully equipped with modern accoutrements including Wi-Fi and satellite TV. The old farm is now part of a 62-acre estate of woodland, established vineyards, a six-hole golf

A view of the abbey ruins  
from the six-hole golf course



## House party

Enjoying lunch on the terrace.  
Below, Helen Rossi, the  
chef and sister of the owner



➤ course and beautifully landscaped gardens of which the abbey ruins are a serene feature.

Against this background, the newly arrived house party had the remarkably pleasant task of trying out the property

away from each other – to explore, read a book, check your e-mails – and then regroup. There is plenty of scope for that here. The grounds are ample, and the house has several living rooms: a study and a sitting room downstairs, ➤

**There is plenty of scope for guests to get away from each other – to explore, read a book, check their e-mails – then regroup**

before it opened to guests. All nine were unanimous in their first reactions: once you've recovered from the sheer impact of the views at Abbazia Celestina, you're struck by how very welcoming the place is. You instantly feel at home.

This is not a flashy property. Nor is it minimalist and sleek – which would be completely out of character with the setting. The style is relaxed, with flagstone floors, old wooden doors and shutters, and large fireplaces (lit in the evenings on that late-summer break). Along one side of the villa is a shaded terrace where long (very long) lunches are served. Dotted around the gardens beyond are carefully positioned sitting areas with spellbinding views.

Space is a major consideration for any house party: you need to be able to get



## 5 more great places for a house party

★ **FRANCE CHATEAU LA DURANTIE, DORDOGNE**  
**Sleeps 24**

This gracious property in the heart of the Dordogne's Périgord Vert country was the aristocratic bolthole of the Duke d'Isly, for whom it was built in 1840. There is plenty of room here for a large party to spread out, with large formal areas, cosy corners and a great deal of outdoor space. Much of the interior is suitably splendid, the ground floor replete with great marble fireplaces, parquet floors, chandeliers and lots of gilt. French windows open onto a terrace overlooking

the pretty village of Lanouaille, while the 12 bedrooms offer fine views over the 12-acre grounds. These contain fruit orchards, a badminton court and a beautifully sited swimming pool surrounded by hedges. Other facilities include a library, TV room, wine cellar and billiard room. You can borrow a bicycle to explore the stunning countryside beyond and work up an appetite for lunch. The area is gourmet heaven, with several Michelin-starred restaurants nearby.

**How to get there:** Bergerac airport is a 90-minute drive away, Bordeaux two hours.

**Price:** rates vary according to group size: £4,420–£7,915 for groups of up to 20: ➤



## House party



Walking in the grounds at dusk. Below, Pepe the truffle hunter and his dog

### Everyone agrees that the gardens, with plenty of hidden glades and secret places, are the great glory of Abbadia Celestina

► lamb and local cheeses, with excellent wines from the extensive cellar.

The cook is Englishwoman Helen Rossi, who looks after the property with her Italian husband, Fabrizio. They live in a separate house in the grounds beyond the villa, and although they leave guests very much to their own devices, they are on hand to give advice on excursions, book tables at local restaurants and organise any special activities. On our visit they set up a truffle hunt. Surprising quantities of knobbly black fungus were magicked from the abbey's woodland by Pepe, a local truffle hunter, and his dog while the guests looked on entranced.

Helen Rossi is the sister of Abbadia Celestina's owner, and the fact that ►



#### ► How to get there:

Barcelona airport is about half an hour's drive away.

**Price:** from £5,635 per week plus £875 for the cottage, including two hours' maid service on six days.

**Contact:** Abercrombie & Kent Villas (0845 618 2215; [www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk))

#### ★ SCOTLAND

##### **LICKEYHEAD CASTLE, ABERDEENSHIRE**

**Sleeps 14** (plus five in a separate cottage).

For sheer atmosphere you couldn't do better: a medieval castle with turrets, gables and acres of forest and gardens. The interior creaks with wood panelling which is offset by large, open fireplaces. The castle has seven bedrooms, and house party guests can vie with each other to sleep in grand style in a four-poster bed or choose one of the quirky rooms up a separate staircase in one of the turrets (a cottage in the grounds provides three more bedrooms). The oldest part of Lickeyhead Castle dates back to 1499, and the original Great Hall is now a spacious drawing room. A two-storey wing, added in the 18th century, contains a kitchen with an Aga, and a cook can be provided on request. In the secluded grounds beyond is a lovely walled garden with a burn running through it.

#### How to get there:

Lickeyhead Castle is just outside the village of Auchleven. The nearest railway station is about two miles away in Inch. The nearest airport is at Aberdeen, about 24 miles away.

**Price:** from £1,950 per week, and an additional £250 for the cottage.

**Contact:** Large Holiday Houses in Scotland (01381 610496; [www.LHHScotland.com](http://www.LHHScotland.com))

#### ★ GREECE

##### **CORFU 10, KANONI PENINSULA, CORFU**

**Sleeps 12** (plus four in a guest house).

This fabulous villa has it all: stunning views, sublime elegance, lots of space and seclusion, and plenty of scope to be active – although the great temptation is simply to sink into the considerable comforts here. The glamour is almost palpable, and indeed the property featured in the Bond film *For Your Eyes Only*. Set high above the coast, with large terraces dramatically overhanging the sea, the villa sits in eight acres of dreamy gardens from which a path leads down to a small beach. Inside, the emphasis is on natural materials, with pale-wood floors and furnishings made of driftwood and rattan. The large, airy bedrooms have been cleverly laid out for maximum privacy, and each has a marble bathroom and direct access to the grounds. Facilities include a sea-water swimming pool with a pool-house bar, and a small gym. Golf, tennis, boat trips and waterskiing can all be arranged.

#### How to get there:

For all its seclusion, the villa is just a 10-minute drive from Corfu airport.

**Price:** available on request.

**Contact:** Five Star Greece (e-mail: [ileana@fivestargreece.com](mailto:ileana@fivestargreece.com); [www.fivestargreece.com](http://www.fivestargreece.com)). Rental includes a cook, three maids, a gardener and helpers, with staff on duty daily from 8.30am



## House party



A view across the valley from Abbadia Celestina. Below, one of the golf course's six holes



➤ this is a family-run operation underlies much of its charm. Graham Smith, who made his fortune from litigation software, bought Abbadia Celestina five years ago. Based in Surrey, he and his Bolivian wife Marcela had been thinking of buying a holiday house further south in Italy and came across Abbadia Celestina by chance. They were travelling through Tuscany and, having read a magazine article about the abbey's gardens, made an appointment to visit them. Abbadia Celestina was then owned by another Englishman, Guy Norton, who had bought the property in a semi-derelict

state some 30 years earlier. Over the course of time he had completely refurbished the house, landscaped the gardens, laid out the golf course and even conducted an archaeological excavation of the abbey ruins, during which significant finds were made. Unbeknownst to Smith, he had been contemplating selling. The two men took in the gardens, played a round of golf, had lunch, and Smith left having made a deal over the property.

The Smiths have made changes gradually and with great sensitivity, laying antique terracotta tiles on the bedroom floors, sourcing local linens and developing parts of the garden. Below the swimming pool area is one of Graham's particular passions: a Japanese water garden, complete with koi carp flown in from Japan. This year an ornamental pagoda has been added, neatly concealing a filtration plant for the pond.

Does Abbadia Celestina have an innate quality that encourages this kind of care, or is it the owners' nurturing that creates the special mood here? It's something to ponder as you soak up those views.

**Abbadia Celestina, Civitella Benazzone, Ponte Pattoli, Perugia, Italy** (00 39 0755 941057; [www.celestinaabbey.com](http://www.celestinaabbey.com)). *Sleeps 12. Jan–March £4,000 per week; April–May £6,000; June–September £7,500; Oct–Dec £6,000. Optional meals: breakfast €7, lunch €25, dinner €35 per person*

about €100 for two without wine.

★ **Enoteca Properzio**, piazza Matteotti 8–10 and Via Torri di Properzio 8A, Spello (00 39 0742 30152; [www.enoteche.it](http://www.enoteche.it)). One of Italy's best wine bars has two branches, both in Spello. Have lunch from a menu of wonderful soups, cheeses and salamis, or sample a range of wines or olive oils. Lunch about €40 for two without wine.

★ **La Taverna**, via delle Streghe 8, Perugia (00 39 075 572 4128). This restaurant serves regional specialities with an innovative twist and is a local favourite for romantic dinners. Dinner about €55 for two without wine

### WHAT TO SEE

★ **Assisi** is Umbria's crowning glory. The magnificent church complex has frescos by Giotto, Cimabue and Simone Martini.

★ **Perugia** is a wonderful jumble of Etruscan, Roman and medieval architecture. The National Gallery of Umbria has an excellent collection of Renaissance and medieval art, including a Madonna and Child unearthed at Abbadia Celestina.

★ **Gubbio** is one of the best-preserved medieval towns in Italy and has a large Roman amphitheatre.

### GETTING TO ABBADIA CELESTINA

Perugia's Sant'Egidio airport is nearby.

**Ryanair** (0871 246 0000; [www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) flies there from Stansted from £57 return in September.

### WHERE TO EAT

★ **Taverna del Lupo**, via Ansidei 21, Gubbio (00 39 075 927 4368; [www.mencarelligroup.com](http://www.mencarelligroup.com)). This trattoria is a culinary landmark. Hams, cheeses and truffles are particular highlights. Dinner

