WENDY PERRIN'S WORLDWIDE GUIDE TO AFFORDABLE MAGAGATIONS WENDY PERRIN'S WORLDWIDE TO AFFORDABLE MAGAGAS

Scoring the perfect villa has never been more achievable than now.

Detailing the prizes and pitfalls of going the rental route, Consumer News Editor Wendy

Perrin shares her field-tested tips for finding that most elusive of villa stays—an inexpensive
gem on the beach—and for extracting the most value whatever your destination

PLUS: Our directory of 49 vigorously vetted villa rental specialists, who hold the keys to
an array of properties, from a pied-à-terre in Paris to a private island estate in New Zealand

 Go to cntraveler.com/ villarentals to download the worksheets "How to Identify the Right Villa Rental Agent and Villa for You" and "What You Need to Know About a Villa Before You Arrive."

 Wendy's blog, perrin post.com, lists St. Martin recommendations and useful Web links. Scroll down to "Topics Covered," and click on "Caribbean." T'S THE HOLY GRAIL OF VILla rentals: A home smack on the beach, where your terrace is just a shell's throw from the sand and where the first thing you see when you sit up in bed in the morning is an unobstructed expanse of turquoise sea. Such a place is often

extravagantly expensive, of course. Of all the features a rental villa can have, a beachfront location is the one that will shoot the price the highest. Renting a house just a one-block walk from the strand can save you hundreds if not thousands of dollars.

If ever there was a time when the beachfront rental has entered the realm of possibility, however, that time is now. On many islands and coasts, homeowners are ready to negotiate, and the deals are flying. Last winter, I decided to seize the day and see how little I could pay for a snazzy beachfront villa in the Caribbean at the height of the season: the February Presidents' Week school holiday. I ended up scoring a state-of-the-art three-bedroom villa with a private pool on the French/ Dutch island of St. Martin/Sint Maarten. The living room and master bedroom were no more than 20 steps from the beach, and the floor-to-ceiling glass walls facing the ocean made you feel



The private ter-

come with a gaze-

race and pool

like you were outdoors even when you were in. My family and I had 5,240 square feet of space—including a private 1,500-square-foot oceanfront terrace and an architecturally unique 522-square-foot pool—as well as every comfort, from king-size canopy beds with plush pillowtop mattresses

to iPod docks with poolside outdoor speakers to bathrooms with the most elaborate showerheads, jets, and nozzles I've ever seen. The nightly rate? Including housekeeping and tax, \$1,062. That breaks down to \$354 per bedroom per night. Even with today's great deals at beach resorts, I can't imagine getting all this at any hotel for less than \$1,000 a night.

How did I find this bargain? First, I avoided tiny and exclusive islands—e.g., St. Barts or Mustique, where the demand for villas outweighs the supply and puddle-jumper flights to get there can be pricey. Instead, I chose a more trafficked island where supply exceeds demand and affordable nonstop service is available from many U.S. cities. Now, make no mistake, St. Martin/Sint Maarten is overbuilt and junky in parts—the parts that, sadly, most cruise-ship visitors never get beyond (mainly on the Dutch side). Still, it has plenty of scenic drives, hidden-gem beaches, authentic lo-

cal color, and world-class cuisine . . . if you know where to go (mainly on the French side). I chose a spot on the Dutch-French border so we could quickly reach the delights of the French side while also having convenient access to the boating and water



Photographs by Timothy Baker

Starfish's airy living/dining room is a spacious 784 square feet. sports infrastructure of the Dutch side.

Another strategy for getting the best beachfront value for your dollar is to rent a villa that's not a freestanding house but rather a unit in a set of residences. Most unattached beachfront Caribbean rentals have more than three bedrooms and represent a value only if you can fill every bed. My party was small, how-

ever: I required only two bedrooms for my family of four. And when you need just two or three bedrooms on a beach, it often makes sense to rent a residence that splits the cost of the amenities with other units. We chose one of six beachfront villas (and 15 non-beachfront) that belong to the Coral Beach Club in Oyster Pond.

Each shares a concierge desk, a gym, a parking garage, and a housekeeper but has its own private pool and terrace. Only when we walked outside our villa did we feel like we were part of a larger development; indoors, gazing through those glass walls at the sea, there were no other buildings in sight, so it felt like ours was the only thing on the beach.

My third tactic for achieving the affordable beachfront villa was to rent a property with adjustable rates, where the price depends upon how many bedrooms you occupy. Such arrangements are common in the Caribbean: You can pay a lower rate by renting only a

The rustically charming town of Grand Case is the gourmet capital of St. Martin.

A vendor sells hand-crafted musical instruments during the Harmony Nights festival.



A VILLA CAN CONNECT
YOU TO LOCAL LIFE. ST.
MARTIN'S TOP-NOTCH
DINING AND ITS WINTERTIME
STREET FAIR IN GRAND
CASE WERE HIGHLIGHTS

portion of the rooms, yet you get the entire property to yourself. The Coral Beach Club has such sliding

ther by renting just two bedrooms for \$798 per night (including housekeeping and tax). I also sought out a property that allows stays of fewer than seven nights. Many owners—especially in Europe—insist on a seven-night minimum, often from Saturday to Saturday. When you're trying to snag cheap airline tickets, how-

rates, so we were able to reduce the \$1,062 even fur-

IS A VILLA FOR YOU?

What to consider before embarking on the rental route

Am I better off at a hotel? Many travelers have a glamorized view of a villa vacation. But staying in a private home without the array of help you get at a hotel could mean more work. Even with a part-time housekeeper, you often need to wash dishes, do laundry, and take out the garbage. You might also need to buy not only groceries but household supplies such as dish detergent, paper towels, soap, sponges, toilet paper, and trash bags. And living in an authentic villa means taking care of it: In Provence, for instance, where a traditional home has shutters to keep it both cool and secure, you must close and fasten all of them every time you leave the house; you also need to collapse the outdoor parasols in case of a sudden mistral. When I spoke with villa owners in Italy, some complained about Americans hanging wet towels on antique bedposts and tossing them on floors, thereby damaging the wood, or failing to carry the outdoor furniture cushions into the house at day's end. Lastly, you might be asked to leave a villa "broom clean" when you vacate, which includes stripping the beds and removing all the food

2 Do I require American-style comforts?

If you decide to splurge on a staffed villa, the work disappears. What may not disappear, however, are the inconveniences that come with old homes in rural areas. Many European villas, for instance, have no airconditioning, no window screens, no high-speed Internet, no heated pool, and a limited supply of water.

Many villas, especially those in Europe, rent only in one-week increments, often Saturday to Saturday. Villas closer to the United States, however, may have four- or five-night minimums and allow more schedule flexibility.

What amenities do I require?

Say you're going with a group of couples. Do you need a private bathroom for each bedroom? Standard-issue amenities in the United States—a barbecue grill, a clothes dryer, CNN, Wi-Fi—are not so standard in some countries. Ask the other members of your group to make a list of their must-haves. One

person might suffer from allergies, for instance, and require a property with no animals on it.

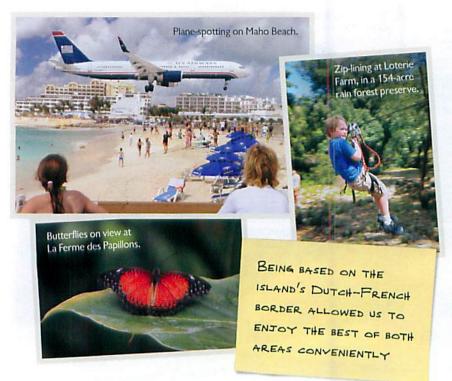
5 How do I envision spending my time?

A Europe-bound group with plans to do a lot of sightseeing might want a location convenient to a railway hub, whereas one staying put might want a shaded terrace for outdoor dining.

Should I arrange for a villa with built-in staff?

In Europe, if you don't want many precious hours to be swallowed up with meal preparation, household chores, and battles with foreign appliances, you need both a cook and a housekeeper, at least part-time. The big advantage of full-time staff—especially a cook or a caretaker who lives on the property—is that it makes a house particularly warm and inviting. A majordomo who has cared for a property for years—and whose family may have served the owner's family for generations—not only makes life a lot easier but expands your window onto the culture.

from the fridge.



ever, date flexibility is key. Because the Coral Beach Club allows rentals of six nights, I managed to reduce my airfare from New York to \$328 per person. (Renting for seven nights would have doubled the airfare.)

My most important strategy, however, was to seek the guidance of a villa rental agent who knew my destination like the back of her hand and could match me to the right location and residence. Marilyn Pulito of Villas in Paradise, whose sole focus is St. Martin/ Sint Maarten, owns a home on the island and has spent every winter there for the past 25 years. Not only did she steer me to Oyster Pond—which provided quick access along picturesque roads to the most charming spots on the French side of the island—but she also picked a beach suitable for kids (Dawn Beach, perfect for bodyboarding) and a property with every amenity on our wish list (free no-hassle Wi-Fi above all). She knew that the Coral Beach Club was offering a special paythe-low-season-rate-in-high-season deal, and she suggested villa No. 5, Starfish, because it's on a relatively private, peaceful section of the beach.

What did I give up to get this bargain? Well, I did not get the silky, flotsam-free white sand beach with a calm glassy sea that I would have gotten on, say, Anguilla-where a beachfront two-bedroom of equivalent comfort and appeal, Meads Bay Beach Villas, would have cost me \$1,080 per night, including tax (versus the

\$798 I paid). I did not get the picture-postcard panoramas unmarred by high-rises in the distance that I could have gotten on, say, St. Barts-where the charming beachfront home I might have rented, Crystal Dream, had a two-bedroom rate of \$1,178 per night. Nor did I get the glamorous seclusion—the virtually private beach—that I could have gotten on St. Martin itself had I rented a villa such as La Vie en Bleu, located on the spectacular strand at (Continued on page 126)

HOW TO GET GOOD VALUE IN A VILLA

Steps for making your dream rental an affordable reality

hoose a destination where supply exceeds demand. Pick places where villas are abundant: Forgo high-profile Anguilla for Virgin Gorda, overexposed Tuscany for Umbria. And consider the length of the rental season: Destinations where villas are filled three to five months of the year, such as Italy, are pricier than those where the season lasts eight or nine months, as it does in the Caribbean.

Go where the U.S. dollar is strong. Greenbacks usually stretch a lot further in Costa Rica or New Zealand than in England or France.

Go where villas have adjustable rates. In certain regions or seasons, if your group is not big enough to fill all of a villa's bedrooms, you can pay a fraction of the rate for a fraction of the bedrooms yet still have the property all to yourself. Even when adjustable rates aren't published, try to negotiate for them.

Prioritize your wish list. Decide which features and amenities (a modern kitchen? air-conditioning? Wi-Fi?) you're willing to give up to get those you can't live without. Say a beachfront location is a must: What can you

forgo in order to be able to afford it? On Barbados, for instance, oceanfront villas are not too expensive if you're willing to do without a pool. If what matters most is a panoramic ocean view, you'll save thousands of dollars by renting inland, atop a hill, and driving three minutes to the beach. Or choose a house that's waterfront but requires a five-minute walk down a path to get to the beach. Ask your villa rental agent which amenities drive up prices the most at your destination, since these things vary from country to country. On the French Riviera, for instance, air-conditioning, Wi-Fi, and a heated pool won't add much to the cost; in Tuscany, they'll send it soaring.

Consider what the rate includes.

Sometimes villa rental rates exclude a hefty tax, a cleaning fee, and additional charges for air-conditioning, heat, and the privilege of paying by credit card. Sometimes they include staff, beach-club access, a rental car, and even a boat. If a villa does not have beach access, find out if you can buy day passes to a nearby oceanfront resort. Two years ago, my rate of \$700 per night for a hilltop villa in Jamaica included day passes to a nearby beach resort with a water park-passes that normally go for \$55 per person.

Go where the cost of labor is low. Having staff at your villa in the British or U.S. Virgin Islands, for example, is usually more expensive than it would be on Jamaica or Barbados. Want only a cook? Realize that at some destinations (e.g., Provence or St. Martin), "cooks" are pricey gourmet chefs. You'll get better value if your cook is part of a villa's built-in staff.

Consider renting a villa that's part of a set of residences which share certain amenities. When you need fewer than four bedrooms and don't require the privacy of a freestanding house, this is an easy way to reduce your rental bill. Such villas often come with their own private pool and terrace for outdoor dining, yet they benefit from the shared staff and grounds.

Use a rental agent who works directly with villa owners rather than with property management companies. Management companies tend to standardize the prices of all the properties they represent. Owners, however, may decide to price their villas below the current market value in order to rent them more often.

-W. P.



AOUAMARE

Virgin Gorda, BVI: Ideal beachfront location for cluster of three 5BR, 6½BA homes. Luxe finishings 30-foot vaulted ceilings Great for weddings From \$13,750/week. Contact Hunter Butler, Blue Escapes





CHONGWE RIVER HOUSE

Zambia: Safari setting for 4BR, 4BA house nestled in Lower Zambezi National Park, with full access to facilities of nearby Chongwe River Camp. Unique decor, pool, game viewing from windows. Elephant lover's paradise. Private vehicles, guides for walking safari. From \$3,900/nlght. Contact Cherri Briggs, Explore, Inc.



AMAROO

Queenstown, New Zealand: 5BR, 3BA with modern decor, Australian Aboriginal artwork, stunning lake and mountain views, courtyard with hot tub. From \$9,520/week with a 3-night minimum. Contact Jacqui Spice, Touch of Spice



CASA KIMBALL

Dominican Republic: Dramatic ocean views from every bedroom in ultramodern 8BR, 8BA home in gated com ear beaches. Infinity pool, hot tub, full staff. From \$3,000/night with a 4-night minimum. Contact Jason Matthews, North Coast Management



SUN DAZZLE

Oahu: 7BR, 8BA beachfront estate near Waikiki with mossic-tiled pool hot tuly gournet kitchen, housekeeping 3 days/week. From \$16,450/week. Contact Anne Pawsat-Dressler, Hawaii Hideaways

ST. MARTIN SINT MAARTEN

Marilyn Pulito, Villas in Paradise, Medway, Massachusetts

275 properties (low season, \$1,400-\$53,000; high season, \$1,750-\$74,000). Overall portfolio: \$\$

Pulito has been booking villas on the island for 23 years and has owned a home there for 20. All properties come with private pools and daily housekeeping. and she knows each one intimately. Pulito can tell you which villas best accommodate small children and whether the walk from your villa to the beach is sandy or rocky (508-533-1388; marilyn@villasinparadise.com; villasin paradise.com).

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

Nancy Anderson, McLaughlin Anderson Luxury Villas, St. Thomas 84 properties (low season, \$1,300-\$22,000; high season, \$1,500-\$38,000). Overall portfolio: \$\$

Anderson has lived on St. Thomas for 25 years, so she knows every road, beach, and restaurant on the island and will share with you her favorite finds. Each property, whether a studio cottage or a ten-bedroom mansion, comes with access to a concierge who is accustomed to providing five-star luxury: She was formerly with the Ritz-Carlton, St. Thomas, and can arrange anything from in-villa massages to a decorated Christmas tree (800-666-6246; nancy@ mclaughlinanderson.com; mclaughlin anderson.com).

FRANCE

Annie Flogaus, Just France,

Berwyn, Pennsylvania 190 properties (low season, \$1,800-\$20,350;

high season, \$1,900-\$24,175). Overall portfolio: \$\$

Flogaus is familiar with all the particulars, including the views from each bedroom and the walking distance to the nearest village. Her attention to detail also shows in how thoroughly she briefs clients. Flogaus recommends Provence in June, when the village markets are not crowded and the fields are dotted with bright red poppiesthe only thing missing, she notes, is the lavender, which blooms in early July. Just France is best for self-sufficient travelers: There is no concierge, and only about half the house managers speak English (610-407-9633; annie.flogaus@justfrance.com; justfrance.com).

Carolyn Grote, Ville et Village, Berkeley, California

200 properties (low season, \$1,000-\$10,000; high season, \$1,200-\$16,000). Overall portfolio: \$

Grote's villas exude history and authenticity-which means you should not expect all the comforts of home. In traditional Provençal houses, for instance, headboards are uncommon: "Provençal bedrooms usually have a more spare, Mediterranean style." Another rarity is fancy gardens: "Some clients dislike the look of a gravel courtyard and expect a manicured lawn or a concrete patio." The advantage of such authenticity? Your villa's owners may live nearby and take you to a local antiques market or to the annual cherry harvest (510-559-8080; rentals@villeetvillage .com; villeetvillage.com).

Evan Wood, Homes Away, Toronto

42 properties (low season, \$6,600-\$21,750; high season, \$7,900-\$40,000). Overall portfolio: \$\$\$

Wood hunts down properties with character and authenticity. Each villa includes a local host-an English-speaking longtime resident of the region who is eager to share insider advice and the hidden gems that you might otherwise miss. The host can recommend restaurants, make reservations, take you to a favorite winery or market, and arrange special events (pig roast, anyone?). Homes Away's steep rates reflect the assistance you get not only from the host but also from the housekeeper (all properties are cleaned daily)not to mention the attention to detail in the house book, which covers everything from how to ask "Do you have this in a size forty-four?" to ways to identify a handrolled baguette (800-374-6637; evan@ homesaway.com; homesaway.com).

Paris

Gail Boisclair, PerfectlyParis, Paris 38 properties (low season, \$950-\$2,430; high season, \$950-\$2,430). Overall portfolio: \$

Boisclair's listings are all in or near the artsy Montmartre neighborhood, where she herself has lived for eight years. Most of the cozy apartments are in turn-of-the-century

buildings with old-world charm. You won't mistake your stay for one at the Ritz, but the small size of Boisclair's portfolio allows her to provide personal service-she might be the one to greet you when you arrive at your flat. In keeping with her budget-friendly focus, Boisclair includes Métro stations along with cafés and restaurants as required nearby amenities for her listings (33-1-44-92-00-84; gail@perfectlyparis.com; perfectlyparis.com).

GREAT BRITAIN

Suzanne B. Cohen, Suzanne B. Cohen & Associates, Hallowell, Maine 418 properties (low season, \$639-\$8,750;

high season, \$925-\$12,210). Overall portfolio: \$ The two-night minimum for Cohen's col-

lection-which ranges from manor houses to lighthouses to flats in London and Bathis welcome news to anyone interested in getting a brief taste of villa renting before committing to a full week. She will steer you around the pitfalls, from homes with no shower curtains (or no showers at all) to traffic fines: "Don't park on the double yellow line even if everyone else has" (207-622-0743; suzanne@villaeurope .com; villaeurope.com).

Alison Lowe, Exclusive Castle Rentals, Nottingham, England

40 properties (from \$8,000 per day). Overall portfolio: \$\$\$\$

Lowe represents only fully staffed castles and manor houses, ranging from cozy and intimate to truly grand. She'll send you details on properties after figuring

also advise you on when to go: late spring for wildlife lovers (since elk and bison are giving birth in Yellowstone and the park's not yet crowded) and autumn for fly-fishing (800-550-4589; info@mountain-home .com; mountain-home.com).

Washington Denise McIntosh, Windermere Vacation Rentals, Friday Harbor, Washington

77 properties (low season, \$675-\$11,250; high season, \$750-\$15,000). Overall portfolio: \$

Can't imagine a vacation without a cook or a pool? Then the San Juan Islands are not for you. But if a low-key week of biking, hiking, kayaking, and whale watching is what floats your boat, McIntosh will put you in the right spot and point you toward the right outfitters. She won't book activities or make reservations, but she'll share the must-dos and must-sees: for instance. she'll direct you to the best location for watching oreas frolic-assuming your timing is right (800-391-8190; denise@ windermeresji.com; windermerevacation rentals.com).

OTHER REGIONS

AFRICA: Morocco Edward Marquis, The Villa Book, London

35 properties (low season, \$1,500-\$30,000; high season, \$2,250-\$48,000). Overall portfolio: \$\$

His staffed properties, mostly in or near Marrakech, range from riads in the heart of the medina to casbahs in the countryside to contemporary villas in the Palmeraie. All are selected for their peace and quiet-even those only a few minutes from the most bustling marketplace. Marquis will give you the scoop on unfamiliar menu items (such as pigeon pie) and can provide concierge services, including arranging for a belly dance performance in your casbah (44-845-500-2000; edward@thevillabook.com; thevillabook.com).

AFRICA: South Africa Therese Botha, Icon Villas, Cape Town, South Africa

300 properties (low season, \$700-\$10,500; high season, \$1,050-\$38,450). Overall portfolio: \$\$

Whether your ideal villa vacation centers around cities, beaches, or golf, Botha's got you covered with her broad range of properties. Most are in Cape Town and its environs, but several are scattered throughout the country. Her in-house concierge, on call 24/7, can arrange excursions from whale-watching to sharkcage diving (27-21-461-0310; therese® iconvillas.travel; iconvillas.travel).

AFRICA: Safari Villas

Cherri Briggs, Explore, Inc., Steamboat Springs, Colorado

30 properties (low season, \$10,585-\$50,890; high season, \$14,860-\$50,890). Overall portfolio: \$\$\$ Looking to mix the adventure

of a safari experience with the privacy and family-friendliness of a villa? Briggs knows the most spectacular sites to enjoy the best of both worlds. The fully staffed properties, in six countries throughout East and Southern Africa, are located on game reserves-many affiliated with A-list safari lodges with whom she has clout. Briggs spends half the year in Africa and is a safari expert, so she can advise you not only on the villas themselves (all of which she's stayed in) but also on when and where to go to see the wildlife you're interested in (888-596-6377; info@exploreafrica.net; exploreafrica.net).

NEW ZEALAND

Jacqui Spice, Touch of Spice, Queenstown, New Zealand 27 properties (low season, \$1,460-\$5,225;



LES FONTAINES

Provence: Delightful 18th-century mas (farmhouse) with 4BR, 31/2BA. Contemporary decor, large garden, pool with pool house. From \$5,225/week. Contact Annie Flogaus, Just France.

> high season, \$1,880-\$6,270). Overall portfolio: \$\$

These properties, mostly in and around Queenstown, range from luxe city apartments to country hideaways and private island rentals-all featuring modern furnishings and five-star luxury. The contacts Spice has amassed from living in the city mean that her 24/7 concierge service can arrange anything you'd like, from an in-house ski boot fitting in winter to a winery tour during the summer months (64-3-442-8672; info@touchofspice.co.nz; touchofspice.co.nz).

WORLDWIDE

Maxine Harrison, Elysian Holidays, Tenterden, England

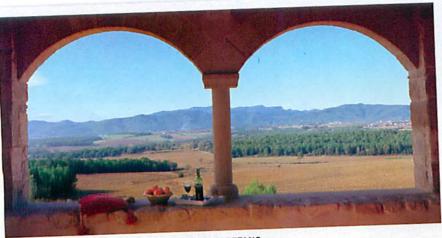
330 properties (low season, \$825-\$27,400: high season, \$2,100-\$70,450). Overall portfolio: \$\$

The countries on Harrison's list practically encircle the Mediterranean and dot the rest of the globe (Brazil, Thailand, and Tobago, to name a few). She's lived in many of the locations where she represents homes, and her contacts allow her clients to experience the local culture. All properties are chosen for their regional character, and better still, Harrison knows which have owners and staff who are likely to invite guests to celebrate the local holidays with them (44-15-8076-6599; maxine@elysianholidays.co.uk; elysianholidays.co.uk).

Sylvia Delvaille Jones, illas and Apartments Abroad. New York, New York

300 properties (low season, \$5,000-\$300,000; high season, \$7,000-\$400,000). Overall portfolio: \$\$\$

Jones has Europe and the Caribbean well covered, with a select few properties scattered on four other continents. Her listings, with a focus on larger, high-end properties, range from Caribbean beachfront cottages to a Tuscan estate that can sleep up to 100. She's especially attuned to multi-generational families' needs and will guide you to a child-safe house (complete with sturdy banisters) in a location with plenty of activities to keep all ages occupied. Her regional concierges can pull off just about any feat: She once arranged to have an opera staged at one of her Italian homes (212-213-6435; villas@ vaanyc.com; vaanyc.com).



MASIA STEFANO

Catalonia, Spain: Panoramic views from 6BR, 7BA fortified masia (farmhouse) on 5 acres. Dining room was once a 13th-century Benedictine chapel. Pool, fireplace. From \$10,400/week. Contact Mary Vaira, El Sol Villas.



IL REFUGIO

Tuscany: Elegant 17th-century 6BR, 5BA home with 2 fireplaces, gourner kitchen, pool with pool house, gardens grapevines woodlands. Daily housekeeping. From \$7,500/week. Contact Suzanne B. Cohen, Suzanne B. Cohen & Associates.



WAILEA SUNSET ESTATE

Maui: Spacious beachfront 3BR, 41/2BA home with Old Hawaii decor, pool, hot tub, outdoor fire pit. From \$10,500/week. Contact Irene Ann Aroner, Tropical Villa Vacations.