

THE

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Membership in *Tuscany* Residence clubs

By Sharon Boorstin

Like a Pashmina shawl on a beautiful woman, dusk envelops the vineyards stretching below me. I hear a scuffle in the dirt and spot a hare, its long brown ears on alert, chasing another one among the vines. I wonder—are the animals fighting or playing? Since this is Italy, I'm betting it is the latter.

I have come to Italy to sample the "Tuscan lifestyle" at Castello di Casole, a luxury residence club in development on 4,200 acres northwest of Siena, an hour's drive from Florence. Like The Timbers Club at Snowmass in Colorado, Esperanza in Cabo San Lucas and The Rocks in Scottsdale, AZ, Castello di Casole belongs to the luxury residential-club portfolio of the Timbers Company.

"Instead of spending \$6 to \$9 million on a villa in Tuscany that will be left empty most of the year, our members pay \$580,000 to \$835,000 for a deeded interest in one, making them co-owners," explains David Burden, founder and CEO of Timbers Company. "They can use it for four weeks a year or more, depending on their level of membership, and if it or a similar villa is empty, they can come and stay as long as it's available for no additional fee."

Members can trade their time in a villa at Castello di Casole for time in a vacation home at one of the Timbers Company's other residence-club sites. They can also sell their interest. If the experience of members at other Timbers Company sites is any indication, they will sell it at a profit.



Luxury Residence Club vs. Luxury Destination Club

What's the difference between membership in a luxury residence club and a luxury destination club, the two current trends among high-end travelers? As an example of a luxury destination club let's take Exclusive Resorts, the leader in the field. Members join Exclusive Resorts for a minimum of \$239,000 (up to 80% is returnable if membership is terminated) and pay \$13,900 in annual dues. They can then select from over 300 luxury villas in 35 worldwide destinations for vacations of 15 days or more, depending on their level of membership.

"Destination clubs are for people who want a variety of vacation sites to choose from," explains Burden. "You join a residential club if you want to return again and again to a villa in a destination you love." Exclusive Resorts, incidentally, has purchased 10 villas at Burden's Castello di Casole for use by their destination-club members.

Villa Sweet Villa

At Castello di Casole, I'm staying in "Casale La Casa," a 7,500 square-foot, four-bedroom villa that features Italian designer furnishings and antiques, Carrara marble bathrooms with Murano glass-mosaic tiles, multiple wood-burning fireplaces, plasma-screen TVs, Wi-Fi and an infinity pool. "Casale La Casa" is one of seven finished villas among the 31 that are being built on the ruins of ancient farmhouses spread throughout this bucolic estate, a hilly patchwork of vineyards, farmland and forest.

Operations Manager Silvia Anichini explains that the estate once belonged to the Italian filmmaker Luchino Visconti, famous for *The Leopard*. "Visconti lived and partied in the castello (castle)," says the blonde Florentine with a lusty laugh, "but it's rumored he housed his many mistresses in the surrounding casali (farmhouses)."

The castle Silvia is referring to is the one overshadowed by a construction crane on the hilltop above us. Built in the 17th century by a noble Sienese family, the castle is in the process of being transformed into a luxurious 41-suite boutique hotel with a world-class spa and restaurants. "We are hoping to open in the summer of 2008, but you know how it is with Italian construction," says Silvia. "Some days the workers come in late; other days they leave early. But they live a lot longer than Americans!"

During my stay at Castello di Casole, I savor tastes of what the Timbers Company calls the "Tuscan lifestyle." One morning Ava, the resident ceramicist, demonstrates how to paint pottery with swirls and interlocking designs like those that have been signature on Tuscan ceramics since the Renaissance. Since my paintbrush skills are seriously challenged, I take much more quickly to a Tuscan cooking class. Lisa and Maurizio, the exuberant teachers, teach me how to make ravioli from scratch and Tuscan



Opposite and above: Castello di Casole luxury residence club.

Photo: Castello di Casole

chicken with raisin, pine nuts and olives, using olive oil pressed from olives grown on the estate. We enjoy the dishes at lunch along with wine made from the estate's Sangiovese and Cabernet grapes.

Other "Tuscan lifestyle" experiences bring me to a hill-top winery in nearby Chianti for a wine-tasting lunch with a view, and to Florence for a private tour of the Uffizi Gallery, some shopping and incomparable Italian gelati. My last night at Casale la Casa, tucked into my veritable "Princess and the Pea" bed outfitted with zillion-thread-count Italian sheets, I fantasize about being a part owner. I imagine myself hiking on trails through the woods, perhaps spotting the occasional wild boar. Then I'd go shopping at a farmers' market in a neighboring village for all the fixings to whip up a Tuscan feast (with the help of Lisa and Maurizio) for family and friends. After a dip in the pool we'd dine on the patio, using plates hand decorated (by Ava) in traditional Florentine patterns, sipping our estate-made wine—and watching a sunset out of a Renaissance painting. www.castellodicasole.com