



Time to house party

'Tis the season to be jolly – so round up your pals and celebrate in one of these glamorous getaways By Kate O'Donnell

ARABIAN NIGHTS EZZAHRA, MOROCCO

Sleeps 14

The moment you arrive here and are greeted by the major-domo Mohammad bearing drinks, you'll never want to leave.

Set in Marrakech's exclusive Palmeraie district (Yves Saint Laurent had a house here for many years), Ezzahra was built just a few years ago, but, with its fully grown palm and orange trees, it looks as if it has been part of the landscape forever.

Each of the seven bedrooms, decorated with handmade textiles, are boho beautiful without ever descending into cliché. The bedroom with the four-poster bed and terrace overlooking the front garden is perfect for those of a romantic inclination.

With endless sofas, terraces and the pouffe-filled Berber tent by the glam pool, even when this house is full, you'll still feel like you have the place to yourself.

While the cook rustles up aromatic French- and Med-influenced meals, Ezzahra's "girl Friday" Maria can take guests around the city's famous *souk* and coffee bars, or on shopping trips in the newer, more westernised areas of town. Positively sanitised these days, the *souk* is no longer the bargain-fest it once was, but it is certainly still worth scouring. Having Maria to hand will ensure all transactions are seamless.

But Ezzahra's true USP is its three full-time beauty therapists who, if you desire, will spend all day pampering you from head to toe, whether it's a pedicure by the pool, a facial on your terrace or a full scrub-down in the *hammam*. As we said, you'll never want to leave. *Seven nights, from £183 per person per night, based on 14 sharing, full board, including all soft drinks, laundry and all hammam, massage and beauty treatments (00 212 243 28688; ezzahra-morocco.com).* ▶





The Sleeping Beauty-esque exterior of the Château d'Arnac

FRENCH FANCY CHATEAU D'ARNAC, FRANCE

Sleeps 8-12

With its turrets, spiral stone staircases, chapel, minstrel's gallery and open stone fireplaces, Château d'Arnac (which backs on to wild-boar-inhabited oak woods near Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne in an unspoilt corner of Correze) is like a French version of Sleeping Beauty's castle.

It's owned by Lady Sarah Tetley Hall, who has lavished it with attention, bringing over her own antiques from England to turn the main house into a sophisticated venue for parties, weddings and even intimate concerts.

Those taking over the house can turn into *chatelaine*, as there are staff on hand to clean and cook – discuss with the cook what you'd like to eat and either shop yourself in a farmers' market or the cook will handle this on your behalf. The quality of local produce – Limousin beef, lamb, freshwater fish, fruit-based liqueurs, *clafoutis* – is second to none.

Next to the ornamental lake in the grounds is the two-bedroom Gatehouse, which sleeps four. An even more romantic affair, with a wooden vaulted ceiling and voile-draped four-poster bed



The romantic master bedroom in The Gatehouse

in the master bedroom, this pretty corner of heaven can be rented at the same time as the main house, or on its own.

The château itself drips with history. Parts of the building date back to the 12th century, there are hand-painted murals in the chapel, it has connections with Richard the Lionheart and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor stayed here several times between the wars. Give in to the seductive fantasy and you really will feel yourself the mistress of all you survey. *Château d'Arnac, from £7,000 for seven nights, room only, including cook and staff. The Gatehouse, from £400 for two nights, b&b (00 33 55 91 09 77; chateauarnac.co.uk).*

Party pads on the web

landmarktrust.org.uk British houses with lots of character: brilliant for castles, large and small.

mrandsrsmith.com Holiday houses and serviced apartments from Bath's Swell Apartments on the King's Circus to lodges in New Zealand.

chicretreats.com Mostly hotels, but some can be booked solo such as Trasierra in Spain, a favourite of Stella McCartney and Sadie Frost.

elegantresorts.co.uk Money-no-object villas in Europe and the Caribbean, including Necker Island, where Kate Moss has been a frequent guest.

Five how-to tips

1 Book early. It's best to book a house for high season four to six months ahead, but if you've missed the boat, don't worry. Late deals do exist; just don't expect to find a bargain.

2 Check who the chef is. It's much cheaper to go for self-catering, of course, but smart houses come with a cook to prepare as many or as few meals as you wish.

3 Get stocked up. Top companies supply a hamper for guests with the basics (milk, bread, eggs, etc) on arrival and can often pre-stock the fridge or larder on request. Make this request for a stress-free first day when you don't know where the shops are.

4 Print the directions. You don't want to end up driving in circles in the dark round Provence/Sardinia/Corsica.

5 Take printed email confirmation of what was agreed, to make sure that what you booked is what you get (in case the cleaner fails to show or the washing machine breaks down).

TUSCAN TREAT LA BANDITA, ITALY

Sleeps 16

For those who fear that villas are always covered in chintz and cluttered with antiques, La Bandita is the answer to your prayers. This sleek derelict-farmhouse-turned-slick-contemporary-getaway in Tuscany's Val d'Orcia is owned by a former rock manager for Sony (who handled the careers of Christina Aguilera, The Strokes and the Kings of Leon) and there's nothing he and his globetrotting travel-writer wife don't know about making a perfectly functioning home-from-home look cool.

Unlike other Tuscan villas, this party pad is as linear and minimalist in design as a *Wallpaper** shoot. But it's comfortable too: each of the eight white-on-white bedrooms has its own bathroom – the bigger “deluxe” rooms have a decadent, rock-star-friendly bathtub slap bang in the bedroom as a focal point – and Santa Maria Novella's cult products by the sink. There's also a *hammam* to soothe your muscles after exercising in the villa's infinity pool or jaunting around the countryside on the bikes provided.



One of La Bandita's sleek and comfy white bedrooms



La Bandita and, right, its pool



Mod cons include high-speed wireless internet access, satellite TV and hand-held GPS devices (for those out cycling or walking), plus essential services such as a daily maid (the sort of thing that, frankly, is about the most important part of any villa holiday), access to the host's wine cellar, a full-time private gourmet chef if you don't fancy doing any cooking yourself and a concierge to advise guests on what to do and where to go (and who'll make all the necessary reservations), plus as many free cappuccinos and as much mineral water as you can drink.

Set south of Siena, in picture-perfect countryside dotted with centuries-old church towers, your only neighbours are the sheep, so there's no curfew or tiresome sound-level limits on partying. You don't even need to pack your iPod – the owner's already thought of that. And, of course, his music collection is, needless to say, brilliant.

Black Tomato (020 7426 9888; blacktomato.co.uk) offers seven nights from £999 per person, b&b, including flights, based on 16 sharing. Lunch costs from €20 (about £18) per person; dinner from €40 (about £35) per person. ▶



Eilean Shona

HIGHLAND FLING

EILEAN SHONA, SCOTLAND

Sleeps 16

It's an epic, four-and-a-half-hour journey to get to Eilean Shona from Glasgow, where you follow the signs to Loch Lomond, Crianlarich, Glencoe and Onich, where you take a ferry to Ardgor. From there, you drive to Castle Tioram, leave your car and take a ferry to Eilean Shona, to be picked up by the estate manager.

The odyssey is worth it. There may be no cars or shops on the island, but there is dramatic countryside, dotted with deer and deserted coves to entertain the kids (JM Barrie wrote *Peter Pan* here). The house itself, set in rhododendron- and pine tree-scented grounds, has a snug and a billiards room to entertain the adults.

There's also a private tennis court to help you work off all the home-cooked meals: huge breakfasts, picnic lunches, afternoon tea, plus five-course dinners. As the house is isolated, you're encouraged to get any food requests in early and to bring all the alcohol you'll need.

Eilean Shona is affiliated to Riad el Fenn in Marrakech, which belongs to Richard Branson's sister Vanessa and it has all the welcoming hallmarks of the Branson clan. With no TV and only limited mobile phone reception, it makes sense to give in to the peace and just relax: explore the island, go fishing and, at night, dress up for card games in front of the fire. *From £230 per person (£100 per child) per night, full board. Minimum cost for whole house hire is £8,000 for four nights, £14,000 for seven nights, full board, including transfers (01967 431 249; eileanshona.com).*



The dramatic Scottish landscape



One of the chic and cosy bedrooms

Party pads to love

Four more fabulous villas just crying out for you to invite your friends over to



Temple Guiting Manor

A ravishing Cotswolds manor house that sleeps up to ten people, plus a five-bedroom barn, also sleeping up to ten people, where Sophie Conran arranges house parties (01451 851 862; templeguitingmanor.co.uk).



Château de Saint Paterne

A très chic jewel box of a hotel in Normandy, just over an hour's drive from Tours, which can be booked exclusively for groups of 16 people (00 33 2 33 27 54 71; chateau-saintpaterne.com).



Kadju House

A groovy but luxurious house sleeping eight, with four staff, plus a chef. It's beside the sea on Sri Lanka's south coast, about five hours' drive from Colombo (020 7426 9888; blacktomato.co.uk).



Drynachan Lodge

A huge house that sleeps 22 people, plus 26 more in cottages on the Cawdor estate in Scotland. Linda Evangelista and Victoria Beckham have done fashion shoots here (01667 402 402; cawdor.com). ■