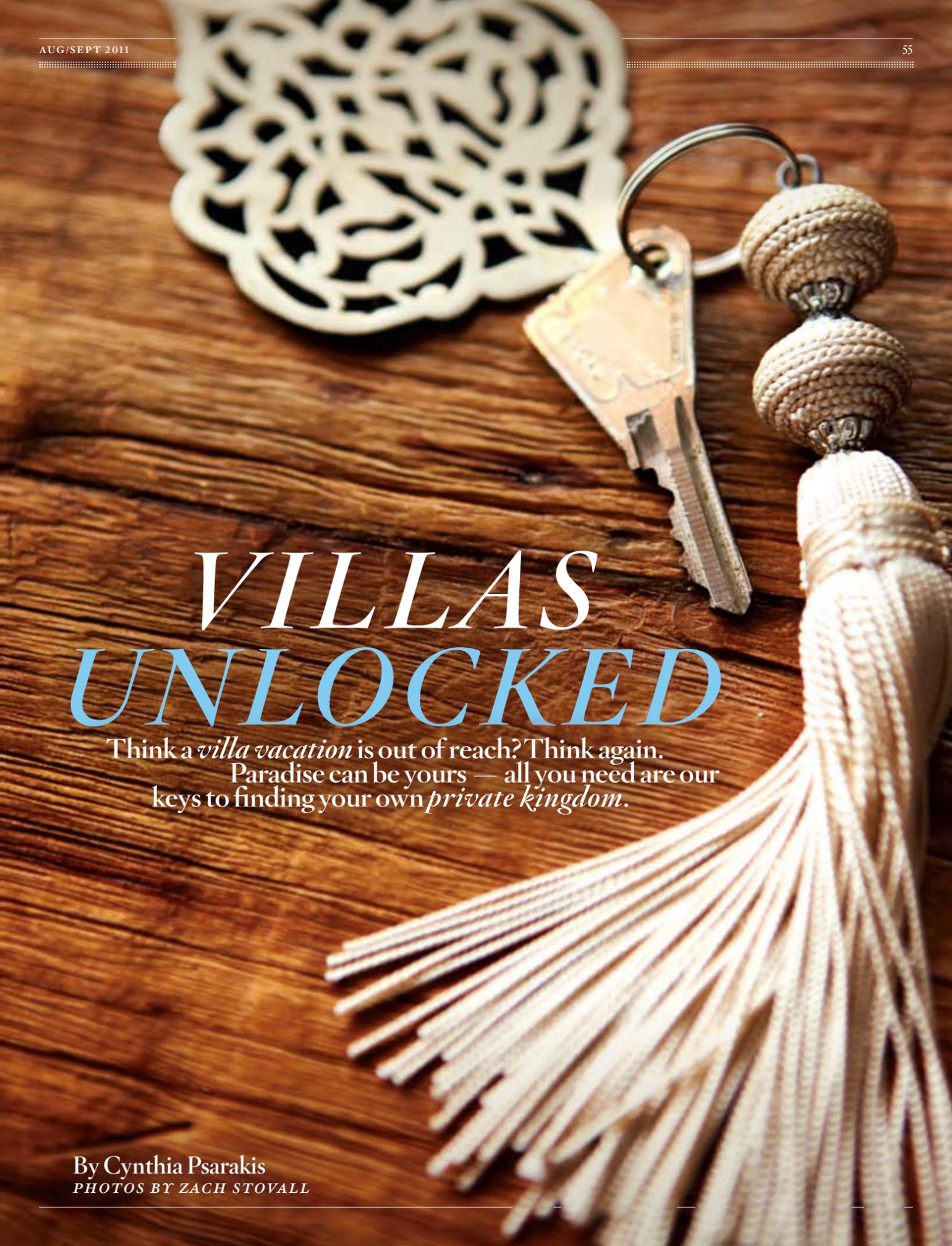




LIKE WHAT YOU SEE? > Our setting is St. Barts, courtesy of St. Barts Properties and Villa Gem-Palm Springs, Villa Palm Beach (pictured), Villa Palm Springs, Villa Mer Soleil and Villa K.



VILLAS UNLOCKED

Think a *villa vacation* is out of reach? Think again.
Paradise can be yours — all you need are our
keys to finding your own *private kingdom*.

By Cynthia Psarakis
PHOTOS BY ZACH STOVALL

WHERE THE VILLAS ARE

You'll find them all over the region, from Bermuda to Tobago and Barbados to Mexico's Riviera Maya. And though there's not a destination without at least a few (we checked), some places are more villa-riffic than others.

ANGUILLA
BAHAMAS
BARBADOS
CAYMAN ISLANDS
JAMAICA
ST. BARTS
ST. LUCIA
ST. MARTIN
TURKS + CAICOS
VIRGIN ISLANDS
(British and U.S.)



PICTURE YOUR HAPPY PLACE. *Does it look like this?*

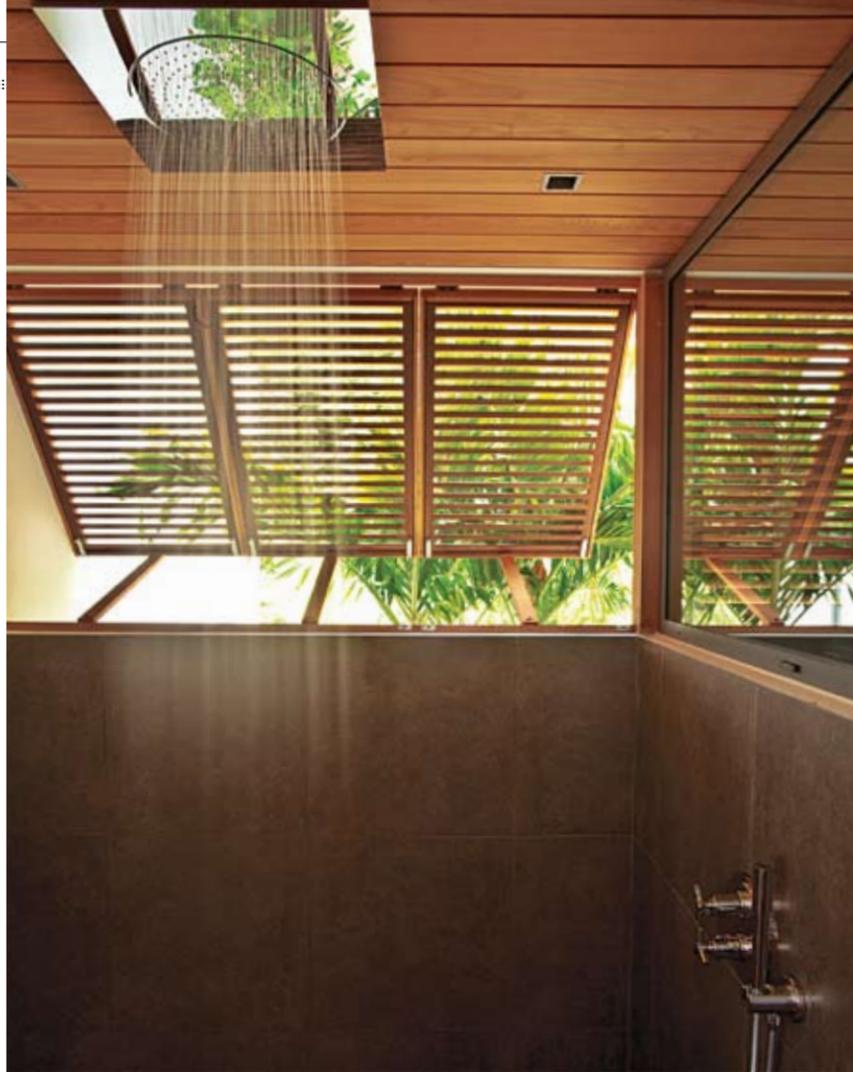
Turns out your happy place is a villa. Specifically, a Caribbean villa, which is even better.

There's a certain mystique about villas that adds to their allure but also — for the uninitiated, at least — makes the prospect of renting one seem daunting. Get past the mystique, and you'll find that a villa stay is an ideal way to truly get to know a place.

So what is a villa? Simply put, it's a private residence you can rent for a vacation. Villas come in a variety of sizes, from cozy one-bedroom cottages to sprawling compounds with 10-plus bedrooms and guesthouses. Some are staffed; others embrace the do-it-yourself spirit. Available amenities can be as basic as air conditioning (no, it's not a given) or as over-the-top as private tennis courts or your very own helipad.

That's what distinguishes a villa vacation from a typical resort stay: the ability to fully customize your accommodations and activities to your desires, on your schedule. You'll also get a taste of island life from the perspective of the residents (particularly if your villa is staffed), along with the freedom to do what you want, when you want — and all in the privacy of your home away from home. Want to skinny-dip in the pool at midnight? Go for it. Itching to stage an impromptu dance party on the sun deck? Feel free. Hankering for eggs and bacon at dinner? *Bon appétit*. The rules at a villa are the house rules, and — for a week, anyway — it's your house.





Ask an Expert

KEY FOR THE PERFECT VILLA VACATION, CONSULT A VILLA specialist. There's no substitute for working with someone who has visited each villa and knows your destination like the back of her hand. Not to mention that this is your vacation — shouldn't someone else do the work?

The most essential quality in an agent is direct knowledge of the villas. The best ones have seen — or better, stayed in — the homes they represent. Destination experience is important too. Look for someone who also knows the island well, who lives there or visits frequently and can give you the inside perspective on local customs, island life and how to make the most of your stay. Finally, choose a specialist who will take the time to go through your wish list, answer all your questions, walk you through the rental process and be available to address any issues during your stay.

Once you've settled on your villa pro, be very specific about your budget, the type of accommodations you need, the amenities you want, and what you'd like to see and do while on your island vacation. It helps to prioritize your must-haves: Villas come in near-endless variety, so the more your agent understands your expectations, the better she can match you to the right home away from home.



Where to start? Use our handy villa checklist at caribbeantravelmag.com/caribbean-villas.



WEIGH YOUR OPTIONS

Take these factors into consideration when planning your villa stay.

DESTINATION

Which island is best? Depends on your needs. For easier travel, look at places with nonstop flights, such as the Bahamas, Jamaica or St. Martin. For a slow pace, try a laid-back island like Anguilla or Virgin Gorda, BVI; if you want plenty to do, consider a diverse destination such as Barbados or St. Thomas, USVI.

SETTING Villas are found in every locale: fronting white-sand beaches, nestled in

hillsides, perched on cliffs and tucked into the secluded corners of full-service resorts. They're often in residential areas, so unless you're staying in the heart of town or at a resort, you may need to rent a car — and if your villa isn't located directly on the beach, be sure to ask your villa agent how far and easy it is to get to one.

TIMING When you go has a major impact on how much bang you get for your buck. Renting a villa for the holidays makes for a memorable experience but will cost a premium — and may require a longer minimum stay. February and March are the busiest (and most expensive) months; the best deals crop up in the slow month of September.

BUDGET Be upfront with your agent about what you want to spend — he'll help

get you the best value for your dollar — and factor in all the costs (groceries, taxes, tips) so there are no surprises. **STAFF** To butler or not to butler? Villas on Barbados, Jamaica and St. Lucia typically come with at least a chef and a maid, but elsewhere your pampering prospects (say, a personal Pilates coach) are up to you. But why cook and clean when you could be enjoying paradise?



Live the Life

KEY THE DAY BEGINS WITH FRESH COFFEE AND BREAKFAST MADE JUST for you. Wander outside, mug in hand, and take in the beauty of the Caribbean as the sun rises over the sea. Later (much later, perhaps) you'll hop in the car and head to the market with your chef to pick up the fixings for dinner, stopping by the bakery for fresh pastries for tomorrow's breakfast. Take a dip, sunbathe by the pool, go exploring on a nearby trail, or head to town and wander through the shops — there's no schedule at a villa but the one you set.

Have lunch at your leisure. Gather everyone around the dining table (this never happens at home), or eat alfresco on the deck. Another swim in the ocean and a relaxing stroll along the water's edge, and it's already time for margaritas, made to order by your butler. (Didn't hire one? Have everyone in your party take a turn bartending.)

There's no need to get all dressed up for dinner — no shirt, no shoes, no problem at a villa, where there's no dress code. Savor local dishes made with fresh ingredients from the cook, or play master chef and whip up your own specialty of the house. Then pour a nightcap and toast the end of a perfect day in paradise from your private balcony overlooking the water. Tomorrow? Do it all over again.



Rent a car (or an ATV) to really get a feel for living — and exploring — like a local.



FROM THE EXPERT

*Steve A. Lassman,
vice president/general
manager of
Villas of Distinction*

WHY STAY IN A VILLA?

Villas offer **incredible value**, especially when compared to renting multiple hotel rooms. You also get **complete privacy** and plenty of space for everyone to enjoy.

BEST TIP FOR VILLA-GOERS:

Don't start with a preconceived notion about a particular villa. Instead choose the **three essential** expectations you have for your villa experience so your agent can do the necessary research to provide the **best options** available.

WHAT AMENITIES ARE REQUESTED MOST OFTEN?

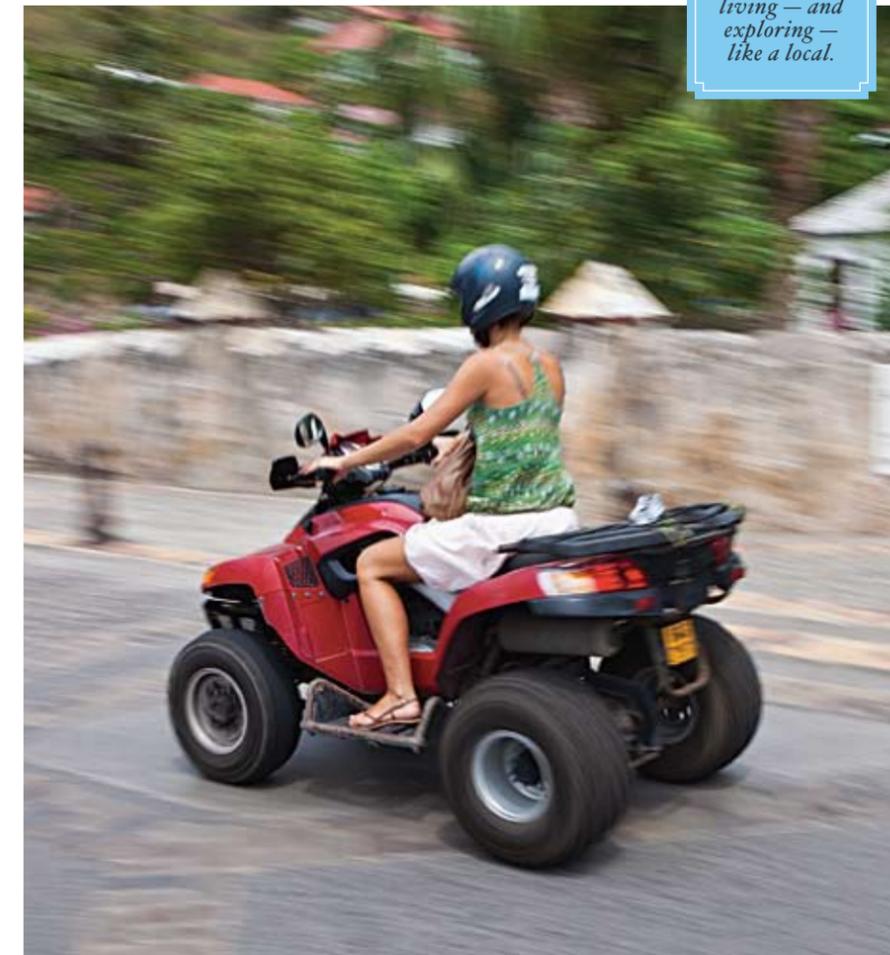
A **private pool**, air conditioning (not all villas have it) and a location **right on the beach**. We also get plenty of requests for staff.

BEST ASPECT OF A VILLA VACATION:

Unwinding in the comfort of home while enjoying the **local culture**, surroundings and food. You also have lots of **room to relax** with your family, plus your own pool, living area, kitchen — the list goes on.

WHAT'S YOUR MOST AFFORDABLE/EXPENSIVE VILLA?

Rent one of the three bedrooms at **Brimstage Estate**, on St. Croix, from \$286 per night. On the other end of the spectrum, **Ty Molineaux**, a 25,000-square-foot villa on a private beach in Antigua's Jumby Bay Resort, starts at \$11,500 a night.



BEST WAY TO WAKE UP
"In a villa right on the beach. In the morning light, the sea looks like an endless carpet of blues. Take a walk along the beach; then head home to the smell of bacon." — LINDA SMITH



BEST WAY TO ENJOY A VILLA

“Don’t rush; you’re on vacation. Things in the islands are done in a far more leisurely manner, so give everything a little more time — relax and go with the island flow.” — NANCY ANDERSON





Make a Deal

KEY THERE'S A COMMON MISPERCEPTION THAT STAYING IN A villa will break the bank, but unless you're going for broke on a private island with all the perks, this isn't so. Our experts unanimously agree that villas can be far less expensive than a comparable hotel or resort stay — just follow their insider tips for getting the best value.

- **Travel in Low Season** Plan to go between mid-April and mid-December, and you'll not only get a significant discount (think 40 percent), you'll also find more availability for in-demand villas.
- **Go with a Group** Travel with another couple to split all your on-island costs (villa, car rental, groceries) in half. The more people you bring, the more you save — but choose your companions wisely.
- **Ask About Lockouts** At many villas, you pay only for the bedrooms you use, so you may be able to rent a larger home at a lower price.
- **Dine In** Buy your own food and drinks to avoid paying the hotel/restaurant markup. Even if you hire a chef (small investment, big return), you'll likely come out ahead, and it's more convenient too.
- **Stay off the Beach** Beachfront villas command premium prices, but on many islands, you'll get a better view from the hills. Just be sure to choose a villa with beach-club access or one that's close to shore.



Ask for extras to sweeten the deal — you might get a free night's stay or a welcome bottle of champagne.



KEY LIVE LIKE A KING

No man is an island, but you can have one of these all to yourself.

LITTLE WHALE CAY, BAHAMAS This 93-acre isle offers lots of rustic charm, along with amenities such as a private airstrip, a mini fleet of boats and tennis courts. Three homes accommodate up to 12 guests, who are tended by a staff of 13. From \$10,500 a night. littlewhalecay.com

MUSHA CAY, BAHAMAS Owned by David Copperfield (yes,

that one), Musha Cay boasts five luxury homes, an outdoor theater, a "secret" village populated by monkeys (really) and 40 beaches fringing 11 islets. From \$37,500 a night. mushacay.com

LITTLE THATCH ISLAND, BVI Perfect for honeymooners or couples, Little Thatch's Seagrape Cottage is sized just for two. Its greatest amenity — besides the hot tub, pool and outdoor dining pavilion — is its seclusion, although

Tortola is just a (complimentary) boat ride away. From \$870 a night. seagrapecottage.net

NECKER ISLAND, BVI Every bit as spectacular as you'd expect Richard Branson's slice of Caribbean paradise to be, Necker Island features a six-bedroom Balinese-style Great House, six smaller Bali houses and a slate of amenities that would put many resorts to shame, including a

full-service spa and gym, an infinity pool with a swim-up bar and a three-person "aero submarine." From \$54,500 a night. neckerisland.virgin.com

CALIGNY ISLAND, GRENADA Just five minutes off the Spice Isle's coast, the luxe retreat of Caligny offers the stunning 10-bedroom Beach House, six beaches, a small flotilla (including a 173-foot sailing yacht) and a portable outdoor theater. Rates upon request. caligny-island.com



FROM THE EXPERT

Linda Smith, owner of Villas by Linda Smith

WHY STAY IN A VILLA?

You're in a **real home**, so the only people around are the folks you rode in with. On Jamaica, there's also the luxury of a **trained staff** dedicated to you exclusively — everything is done for you.

BEST WAY TO FIND THE RIGHT VILLA: Work with a specialist with experience and a **strong track record** in your destination, and ask to be put in touch with others with **profiles like yours** who have stayed in the villas you're considering.

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST TREND YOU'RE SEEING RIGHT NOW?

Mostly **multigenerational families** traveling together, which is probably why nannies are one of our most-requested amenities. But we're also seeing a lot of **girlfriend getaways** loaded with spa treatments — on-site massages are really popular.

BEST WAY TO WAKE UP:

In a villa right on the beach. In the morning light, the sea looks like an endless carpet of blues. Take a walk along the beach; then head home to the smell of bacon.

WHAT'S YOUR MOST AFFORDABLE/EXPENSIVE VILLA?

Almond Hill is \$2,400 a week for one or two bedrooms in low season, April 16 through Dec. 14. **Roaring Pavilion & Spa** — our most remarkable villa, with five bedrooms, a private beach and spa services — starts at \$26,600 a week.



ARE YOU BEING SERVED?
Having a household staff is one of the perks of a villa vacation. Here, a who's who of the most common staff members and the services they provide.

HOUSEKEEPER

Staying in a home away from home is a great idea — until you remember how much time you spend cleaning your house. If you don't need 24/7 help, opt for part-time maid service.

CHEF

In addition to whipping up three squares a day, a chef will do all the planning and shopping — and can show you around the local markets to give you a taste of island life.

BUTLER

Think of the butler as your personal assistant, someone to help make arrangements, tend bar, serve meals, aid the rest of the staff and generally make your stay hassle-free.

LAUNDRESS

A suitcase full of dirty laundry is the bane of any vacation — but a laundress will take care of it for you on a daily basis. Bonus: You won't need to pack a week's worth of clothes.

GARDENER

Not only do gardeners keep the grounds lush and the pool sparkling, they often have a wealth of knowledge about local flora — and maybe a gardening tip or two to share.

WELLNESS PROS

Enrich your stay by hiring a golf or tennis pro for a lesson, or engage an instructor for your morning yoga or Pilates session. Afterward, bring in a masseuse to ease achy muscles.

NANNY

When traveling with several families or young children, consider a nanny. If you need someone only for a special occasion, ask the agency to recommend a baby sitter.



Tipping your staff is a must, typically 10 to 15 percent. Ask your agent about paying in advance.