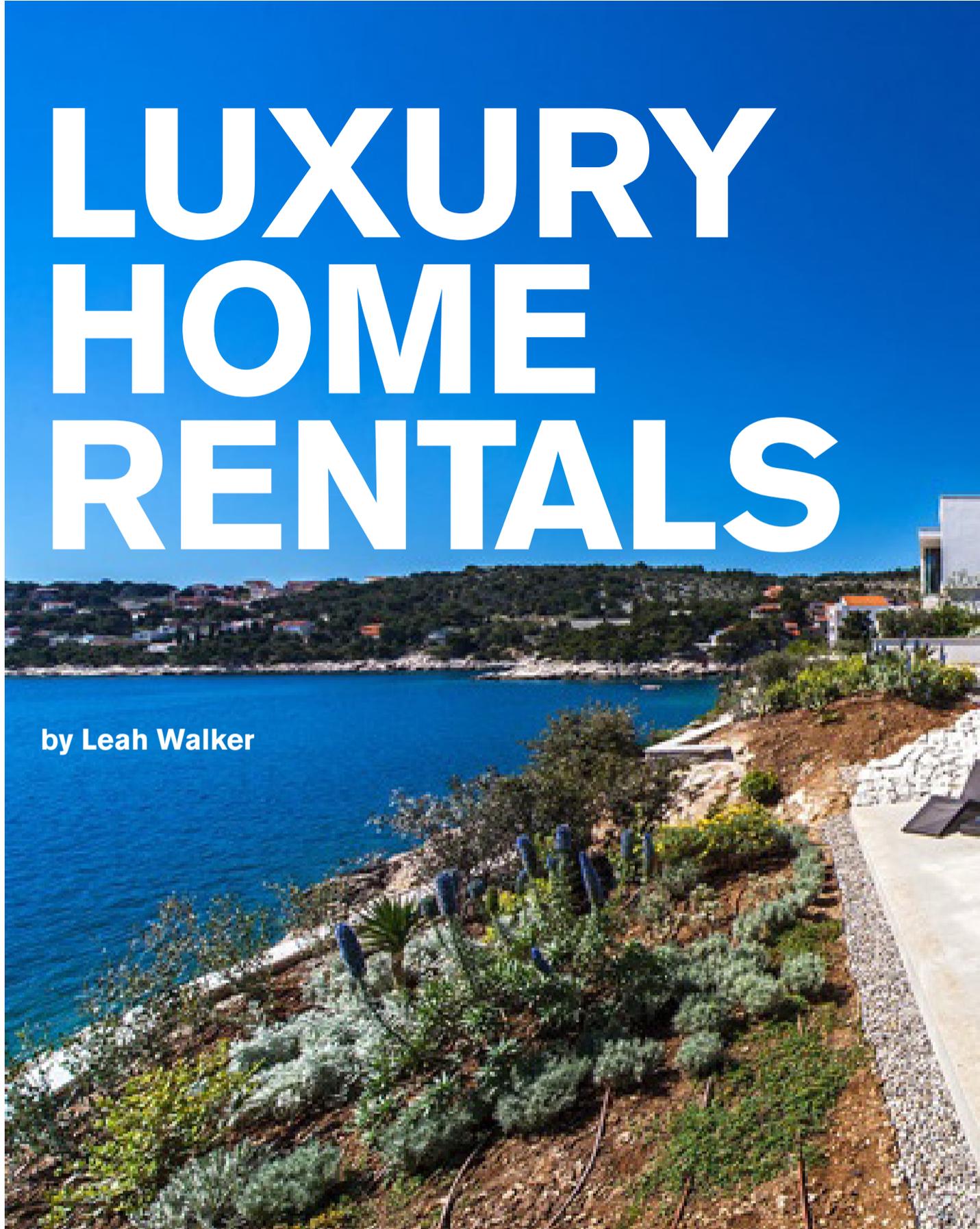


Think five-star hotels and resorts are the only accommodation options for luxury holidays? The ever-increasing trend of renting privately owned villas, apartments, châteaux and homes has led to a growing number of luxury choices for travelers accustomed to the very best. For some insight into high-end holiday rentals, I chatted via Skype with Paola Fiocchi Van den Brande, owner of Passepartout

LUXURY HOME RENTALS

by Leah Walker



Currently living in London with her husband and two daughters, Paola is originally from Italy where she graduated from the Catholic University of Milan with degrees in Russian and German literature and social psychology. After working in Brussels and Frankfurt, Paola then moved to London where she worked in direct marketing for major publishers IPC Media, Reed Business

Information and Bloomberg Businessweek. She left Bloomberg in April 2013 to start Passepartout Homes.

What led you to start Passepartout Homes?

The primary reason for starting the business is that I wanted to look after my family properly and have a good work and life balance. The second reason is that I've probably hit a mid-life crisis where I'd like to do something meaningful for

myself, interesting instead of working for others.

Starting Passepartout Homes was a difficult decision to make—it was during the economic crisis and also would put a financial strain on my family. I didn't want to go down the route of finding investors or asking the bank for money. The money would come out of savings, and I gave myself two to three years to determine if it was a good or bad decision. The company



launched in basically January 2013, but I worked full time for Bloomberg until April of 2013. I knew I couldn't do both and decided to focus full time on my business. It wasn't until

September 2013, that I sat down at my desk five days a week building Passetpartout Homes.

What do you say to people who want to book a luxury holiday, but have never rented a villa and might be weary about receiving the same level of service as compared to a five-star hotel?

A villa will offer more space, privacy and flexibility than a hotel. Space is a key factor, especially when traveling with children, other couples or multiple families. I find it difficult to locate hotels with enough space for the entire family or that offer interconnecting rooms.

Privacy is a plus when renting a villa. Even in luxury hotels, it's difficult to find peace with the noise level of neighbors coming home late at night, switching on the television or taking a shower at 6:00 in the morning. In a villa there's much more peace.

When renting a villa you're not on anyone else's timetable; it's much more flexible. If you'd like to wake up at noon and eat breakfast then you can. Also, desired services and amenities can be tailored to meet your wants and needs. With some of the homes, a cook and daily maid is included in the package. In others these services can be added along with security, a butler, private transfers, etc.

There has been quite a bit of press about scams dealing with holiday rentals. Perhaps these homes don't exist or the





person requesting money doesn't have the authority to rent the homes. What advice would you give to people that are interested in booking a home, but are nervous about being scammed?

Customers need to be educated on how to recognize a scam, but also reassured that not every property owner or agency is a scam. I've had clients request a postal address of the villa, and that's something that I can't just give away. What guarantee do I have that they're also not a scam? It's like a circle. If I don't give them the address then they don't want to rent.

Customers can help protect themselves by not sending money right away. First do some research. Also know that going through a trusted agency is often safer than going through an individual who may or may not own the property.

You have villas all over the



world. When you're adding homes to your portfolio what do you look for in choosing properties?

The first criterion is that it has to be a villa that I'd be happy to rent myself. If it's not something I'd rent then the answer is already no.

Secondly, the villa has to be serviced. It needs to have someone locally as the first point of contact. They'll need to open the house and serve as an emergency contact for clients. If the villa is in the luxury bracket, this contact person needs to be able to recommend and organize a private chef, private maid, butler, security, serve as a local concierge for organizing tours, massages, restaurant reservations, yoga, or whatever is desired by the client.

I also try to work directly with the owners and speak with them regularly. I think it's important to establish a





relationship with the owners instead of being the agency of the agency.

Who is your ideal customer? Where do they want to visit?

My ideal customer is one who I can trust not to trash the property, someone who treats the property better than

they treat his or her own home.

My customers are people who like to travel abroad and discover new cultures and places. The person who rents a villa is someone looking to stay in a place more than a few days. They want to live like a local, which allows them to breathe in the atmosphere and culture. Going to the supermarket, bakery and

butcher, things that locals do, are experiences that the clients enjoy doing. This is someone who wants a more in depth experience. If you choose a hotel or resort, sometimes you don't have any idea what goes on outside of the gates.

Requests are mostly from Europe, though people love my villas in Thailand. The usual suspects like France and Italy are popular—Tuscany, Paris, Provence—those are the most popular, along with Mexico. Most of my customers are European, though I've focused most of my efforts there. I'm just starting to market globally.

What are some of the top travel destination trends in

2014 that you've seen with your portfolio?

There's a huge request for Paris, but there's always a huge request for Paris and generally France and Italy. Within Italy, Tuscany is always big. Sardinia for a while was forgotten, but is now up and coming again. Sicily, Umbria and Apulia are now the hot top destinations. Umbria is sandwiched between Rome and Tuscany and very easy to reach. It's also less expensive and crowded than Tuscany and definitely worth considering.

When renting vacation homes, when should people start organizing their holidays?

The absolute busiest time is January and February. This is when people are organizing spring break, summer and some are even looking into Christmas 2014. At the moment, 90% of my inquiries are about spring break and summer holidays. September and October are my peak times for Christmas inquiries. It's essential to book early, especially for the summer, considering almost all of the nicest summer properties are already booked.

Most people fly to reach their destination, and the earlier you book the better deals you'll find. If you wait until May to book a villa, it most certainly will be unavailable. Hotels are different since they have a bigger capacity, whereas with a villa, there's only one. I know people who book the same villa year after year. In August, they check out and pre-book for the next year.

A villa will offer more space, privacy and flexibility than a hotel.

