

PERSONAL
JOURNEYS

A MEMORABLE PLACE

*In the hill country of Italy*By KEVIN THORNTON
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Not long after we arrived at the villa we'd rented in the central Italian hills of Tuscany, we met the couple staying above us in the converted 14th-century farmhouse.

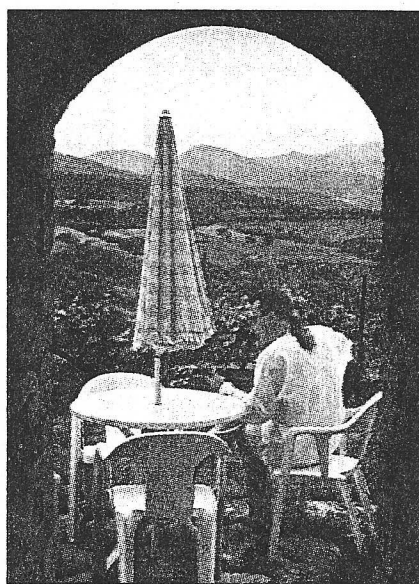
A sweet, energetic British pair, they explained this was the third straight year they'd been there. When I asked why they kept returning, the husband pointed behind us to the stunning view of the lush Apennines hills and valleys, complete with sheep idly grazing in the green meadows, and said, "You can't find that anywhere else in the world."

He was right. What we'd found was a hillside perspective of paradise.

The villa — called Segalare — is about 100 miles south of Bologna, but may as well be a million miles away from the crowded tourist sidewalks of major Italian attractions.

We found it through a random Internet search (try www.italianvillas.co.uk), and arrived by flying into Bologna, then testing our mettle on Italian highways with drivers who mash the peddle to 120 mph and get close enough to sniff your after-shave.

Segalare is located in the Alpe della Luna mountain range of the Apennines,



Tuscan paradise: The author enjoys his guitar and the view.

high above the town of Pieve Santo Stefano. From town, you take a one-lane mountain road up steep hills, past fields of bright red poppies and clean mountain streams, and right through the front yard of a farm where you wait for the chickens to clear before pressing on.

Segalare is actually two buildings —

the large stone residence of the owners, which is a former church, and a similar-looking, though smaller, building next door, a former barn converted into upstairs and downstairs "villas."

The villas are simple in a rustic Italian way — a long dark wooden table in the small kitchen, a large bedroom with a thin, firm mattress, and small windows everywhere offering different perspectives of the glorious Italian landscape.

The Tuscan hills aren't about furnishings, they're about the stillness and the view, and the balanced pace of a countryside that seems satisfied to be stopped in time.

My wife and I had planned a number of day trips, but beyond jaunts to magical Assisi and crowded Florence, we stayed in the hills. Several times we went into town and sipped cappuccino at one of the bars, listening to the staccato rhythms of the men's expressive talk. Then we'd walk the cobblestone streets past complex-looking alleys and stairways before shopping for bread, fresh cheese and local wine.

Mostly we just enjoyed the villa — sunning by the pool, writing at the dark kitchen table, sitting on the small veranda looking at the view, listening to the roosters crow, watching the mist dissolve from the hills in late morning.

We can't wait to see it all again.

Kevin Thornton lives in Finksburg.