

How can you determine for certain whether an agent and a villa are right for you? After reading “Wendy Perrin’s Worldwide, Soup-to-Nuts, Get-It-Right-Every-Time Villa Rental Guide”—complete with the names of 35 thoroughly vetted agents in 16 countries—refer to the questions below to make sure that the agent you contact has a comprehensive understanding of your needs, interests, and tastes.

Agent: _____ **Phone:** _____ **E-mail:** _____ **Web site:** _____

1. How many villas do you represent?

Sometimes less is more. A smaller portfolio may indicate a more selective rental agent. A larger one gives you more options but is no indication that the agent is likely to match you with the best one.

2. How many of these villas have you personally inspected?

The correct answer is “All of them.” However, you’re better off with someone who has seen only half of his inventory but has visited the villa of your dreams repeatedly than you are with someone who has seen every home in his portfolio only once.

3. Do you write the villa descriptions that I read on your Web site? If not, who does, and did that person actually visit the properties?

Some Web and brochure write-ups are penned in glowing language by a marketing person who has never seen the villas. Some agencies even filch information from other agencies’ Web sites.

4. Will someone meet me at the villa and explain how everything works? If so, is this person employed by you or by the villa owner? Whom do I call if I have questions or problems? Whom do I call to arrange local activities and excursions?

You need to know how you’re going to get the key, how well the person assigned to meet you and help you with problems speaks English, and how far away that person lives. If it is the owner himself or an employee of his, he will likely be less at your disposal, and perform fewer (if any) concierge services, than a member of the rental agency’s ground staff whose job is to play host.

5. What makes you different from the hundreds of other villa-rental agents out there?

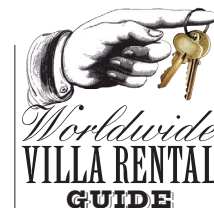
Most agencies claim they provide better service without citing evidence to back up the claim. Look for an answer that shows what makes the agency unique or especially conscientious. Examples of good answers:

“I’m based at the destination, so if there’s any problem, I can be there in twenty minutes to fix it.”

“We’re the only agency that rents homes solely at this destination.”

“I am friends with all the owners and have known them for many years.”

*“We have fifteen villas that are ours exclusively.”
“My job is to be a combination of concierge and local friend who helps make your vacation perfect.”*



**6. Will a “house book” or other binder of instructions await me at the villa?
Who wrote it?**

Unless you are renting a fully staffed villa where you needn't lift a finger, there should be a house book. If it was written by the owner, ask if the rental agent vets it to make sure the information is comprehensive and comprehensible. A French villa owner may know which are the best local restaurants, for instance, but he probably does not have a complete understanding of what Americans need to know about French appliances, French plumbing systems, French housekeepers, French road rules, etc.

7. What materials will you send me in advance so that I am fully prepared?

Insist on driving directions to the villa and a map to illustrate them, a list of what's at the house and what you'll need to bring, and information on activities and excursions that should be booked in advance. (For a complete list of questions to ask once you've reserved a particular property, see “Worksheet 2: What You Need to Know About a Villa Before You Arrive.”)

8. Do you include the villa's real name in your driving directions?

Again, insist on this information. It's tough to know in advance whether the directions will be adequate, and locals may not be familiar with the name your agent has chosen to market the villa under. The best-written directions include not only road signs and odometer mileage but also landmarks to watch for.

9. Which villa in your portfolio represents the best value for my money during this week at this destination, and why?

Ask this not because that villa is necessarily the one to choose, but because the answer will show what factors the agent considers most important. Everybody's priorities are different, and you need to find out where the agent is coming from. Next, you need to find out if he gets where you're coming from. So ask:

10. If you were in my shoes, which villa would you choose, and why?

The answer will indicate whether the agent has acquired an accurate understanding of what you're looking for.

11. Have you personally inspected the villa you are recommending to me?

If the answer is no, insist on speaking with someone who has.

12. When did you last inspect it?

If the agent has not been there within the past year and has no colleague you can speak with who has been there within the past year, go elsewhere.



13. What day-trips are easily made from this villa? How long a drive is it, in minutes, to the things I want to do and see? *For seaside villas: How many minutes' walk or drive is it from my door to the beach entrance? What is the beach like? What color of sand or type of rock is it? Is it safe for swimming? What is the weather like in the mornings? In the afternoons? Is there a time of day when it typically gets cloudy or rainy? * For countryside villas: How close is the nearest village with stores and restaurants? To get to sights in other towns, is the villa near transportation (e.g., a train station) or will I need a car?

Consider a villa's location and the driving times to the activities you plan to pursue. An unpaved ten-mile road with hairpin turns, for instance, can take an hour to navigate. If you will be doing a lot of sightseeing, you might want to be close to trains or other transportation.

14. What features does the villa have to keep our group entertained (for instance, satellite TV, a DVD player, a pool, a game room, a library)?

If you want to spend more time relaxing at your villa than you do touring the countryside, amenities such as a pool will be important to keep everyone happy.

15. Does this villa have any features that render it unsafe for the very young or the very old? Do the staircases have railings? If there's a pool, is it gated? Are fireplaces screened? Would a traveler with physical limitations have any trouble negotiating the property (e.g., stairs, bathtubs, accessing it from the parking area)?

If anyone in your group has special needs, be sure to mention these to your agent.

16. Is the villa staffed? If not, will I be able to hire staff (e.g., a cook) if needed?

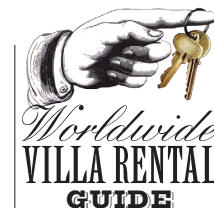
Do you want to cook, or would you prefer that someone else take care of meals? If the latter, will you require a full-time chef or someone to come in for just a few hours each day? Do you want housekeeping services more often than the once-a-week standard for most villas? Will you require additional staff, such as a butler or a driver?

17. Will I have access to a concierge? If so, will you or someone in your local office handle my requests, or will they be contracted out to another agency? How far in advance do most arrangements need to be made? Do you charge an additional fee for this?

Do you want someone else to arrange activities and make restaurant reservations? Do you need an elaborate itinerary? Many agents offer these services for free, while some charge a fee; others don't perform them at all.

18. What is the single thing I will most dislike about this villa?

Every home has drawbacks, and everybody has different levels of tolerance for those drawbacks. So if the biggest disadvantage cited by the rental agent does not sound so bad to you, ask about the second and third biggest disadvantages, in case these are things that he considers minor but you consider major.



19. Do you know the owner personally?

A close relationship between agent and owner is not mandatory, but it's a plus, since it can lead to special favors.

20. Does the owner live nearby?

The likelihood that you might meet the owner varies significantly from place to place. In France and Italy, many owners reside nearby; in the Caribbean, few do.

21. When did you last send a client to this villa?

The more recently, the better. If an agent has not visited the property for a while, he should be keeping up with the house's condition through feedback from his clients.

22. May I speak to that client as a reference? If not, may I speak with another client who stayed there recently?

A few of the fancier agencies will not furnish clients' names and numbers, claiming they must protect their privacy. But most agents will. If you have a choice between speaking with a client who rented the villa you're considering and speaking with someone who rented a different villa more recently, choose the former.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT A VILLA BEFORE YOU ARRIVE



Once you've found the right villa rental agent and think you've chosen the right home for your vacation, here are questions to ask to ensure that there are no unpleasant surprises.

Location:

- Is it on an unpaved road? How rough is the road, and for what distance?
- What type of car do you recommend I rent? What type of car do you drive when you visit the house?

Staff:

- If the villa is staffed, how do I address the staff?
- How do I tip them?

Amenities:

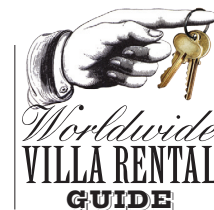
- How is the water pressure?
- How many people can shower at the same time?
- Is there a phone? Should I take a cell phone?
- Is there air-conditioning? If so, what is the charge for using it?
- Is there high-speed Internet access? If so, what is the charge? If not, where is the closest cybercafé? How many minutes' drive is that?
- What is the charge for turning on the heat?
- What English-language television channels are there?
- Is the VCR or DVD player American standard?
- How often does the power go out, and what causes it to go out?
- Will I need to bring electrical outlet adaptors?
- Is the kitchen fully equipped? Is there an American-style coffeemaker? A microwave? An outdoor grill?

Supplies:

- Will I need to bring any linens, such as beach towels?
- What are the local store hours? If I arrive on Saturday evening, which stores are open on Sunday so I can buy provisions and supplies? How many minutes' drive are these stores from the house? Is it better for me to stop at the store en route from the airport to the villa? If so, exactly what will I need to buy?
- Alternatively, can someone stock the fridge for me in advance and buy any household supplies we will need?

Payment:

- Can I pay for the villa with a credit card?
- What are all the different extra expenses that I might incur?
- Can I pay the extra expenses with a credit card?



APPENDIX: VILLA SECURITY

Although most people vacation in rental villas without incident, robberies and other crimes do occur. Asking the owner or rental agent the following questions will help you assess the security of a given property and put you at ease so that you can fully enjoy your little piece of paradise.

1. Has the agent you're working with made a personal visit to the property?

Rental agencies often manage dozens of properties scattered across several islands. Make sure you talk to someone who is familiar with every aspect of the villa, from the height of the fence to whether the kitchen door sticks.

2. Do all the doors and windows have functioning locks?

Your agent may assure you that your villa is in a safe area and that locks are unnecessary, but never accept a property without this most basic security device.

3. Is the exterior of the property well lit? Is the yard fenced?

It may seem drearily unromantic, but a villa with fences and outdoor lighting is far safer than one without. Besides, you can always turn the lights off for a bit if you feel like stargazing.

4. Are multiple sets of keys available in case different members of the group wish to split up for the day?

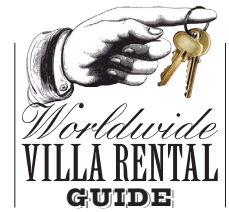
If not, you'll be reluctant to lock up, which would be a mistake.

5. Does a fence separate the property from the main road?

A gate or a fence won't stop a determined burglar, but it will act as a deterrent and will discourage any unwanted company from driving up to your villa.

6. If there is an alarm system, is it connected to a monitoring service?

Local police are often slow to respond in the Caribbean, so independent security patrols can fill the gap until help arrives. They can also determine whether an alarm was triggered by a legitimate threat or something harmless like a nosy toucan.



**7. Have there ever been any break-ins at the villa or in the area where the villa is located?
How serious a problem is crime in the area?**

A call to the local police and a quick online search of local newspaper Web sites will tell you if there's cause for concern.

8. Is a safe or lockbox of some kind provided?

Securing valuables and travel documents should be routine whenever you're away from home.

9. Are the security precautions at the villa you're considering typical of those at others on the island?

Ask the agent what security measures are in place at nearby villas. If the one you're interested in is not at least as secure, beware: Villas that are known to be less protected are more likely to attract unwanted attention.

10. Does the agent provide mobile and nighttime emergency contact numbers?

Thieves don't work nine to five, so you should always have a contact to call in case of an off-hours emergency.