



Where romance reigns supreme

Where on Earth can lovers go to share intimacy in the most perfect settings? Rachael Oakes-Ash scours the globe for unsurpassed hideaways for Valentine's Day couples.

It's Valentine time, which means anxiety for smug marrieds and singletons alike. If you're in a relationship, ignoring Valentine's Day can be detrimental to your health and may find you flying solo come February 15. If you're single and don't want to be, Valentine's Day can be like an ingrown toenail on your yearly calendar. Many people just take two Panadol and go to bed, waking up when it's all over but knowing it's just digging itself in for next year.

This year the day of St Valentine falls on a Monday, which could mean a preceding weekend of forced romance or one of single hell. For some this will mean a weekend away, for others hours spent by the letter box waiting for cards that never arrive (sob) ... although you could always do what 15 per cent of American women do every February and send a card to yourself.

Travel has always been perceived as romantic regardless of your marital state; it's just that some destinations are

more romantic than others. If unattached, you'd be masochistic to spend February 14 in known honeymoon destinations such as the Maldives, Niagara Falls or in a motel attached to a Las Vegas chapel.

Those who see Valentine's Day as just another cynical Hallmark occasion might like to dig a little deeper and discover that the following romantic destinations have a twist. Don't-wannabe-singles, however, should be warned that the ensuing information may cause distress.

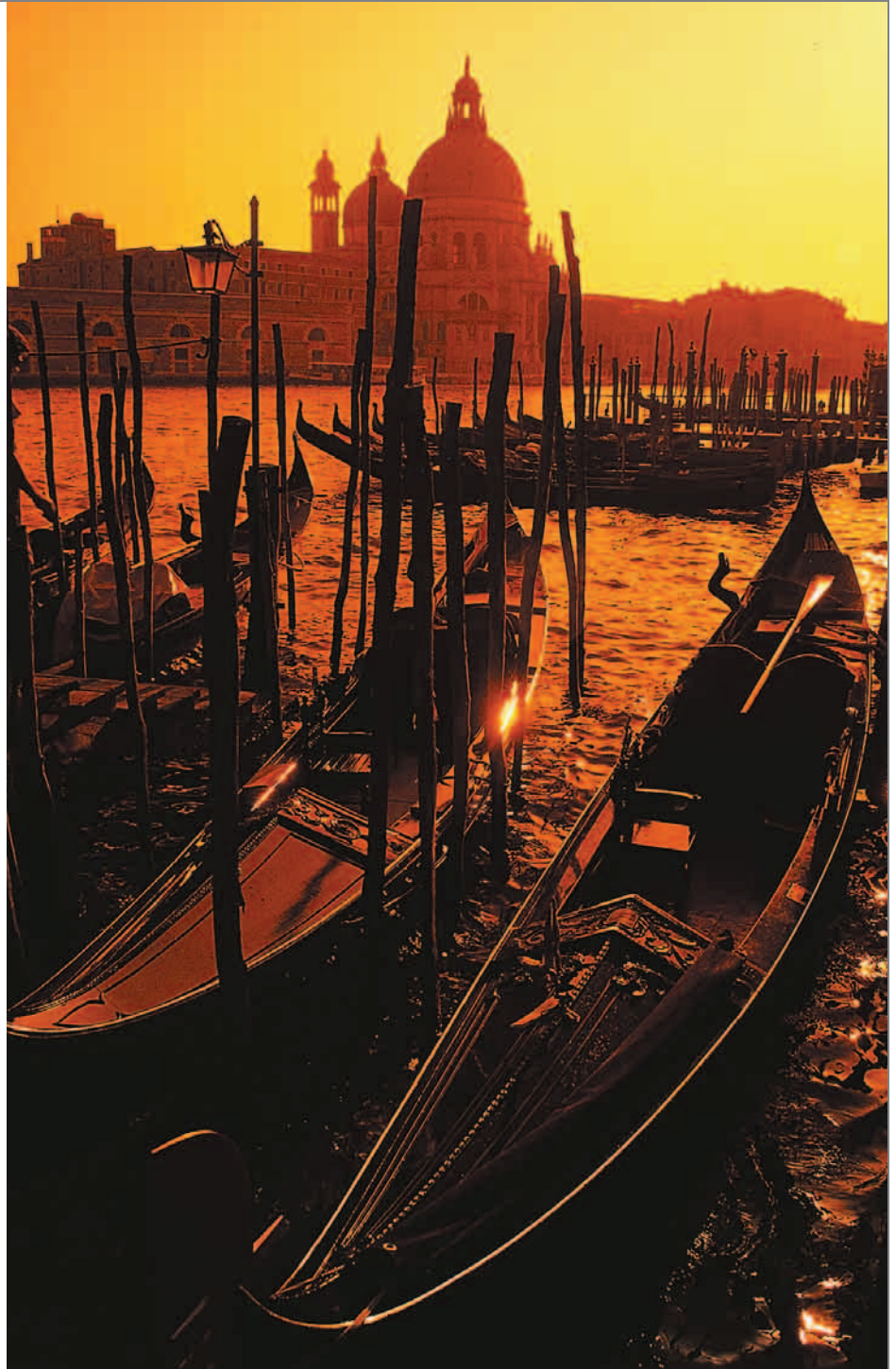
PARIS, FRANCE

Combine the world's most romantic city with the year's most romantic date and you have a time and place for broken-hearted travellers to slit their wrists. You cannot beat Paris when it comes to romance. The French accent makes the hunchback of Notre Dame seem like Brad Pitt. And that's before the gooey cheeses, paté to tantalise the tongue and

dimly lit cobbled laneways that beg for love action after dark. Despite every woman's obsession with this city (even Carrie found love in Paris in *Sex and the City*) and an overload of French clichés in travel brochures, there are still some yet-to-be-discovered lovers' delights.

L'Hôtel in St Germain des Prés on the Left Bank of the Seine is a true lovers' den: 20 rooms with baths deep enough for two and lush satin textures on the walls, beds and floors, plus a lift so small it forces you to touch bodies. This is where Oscar Wilde died, where Johnny Depp wooed Vanessa Paradis and where French lovers hide from their spouses. The best-kept secret? The aqua-tiled Roman bath in the sandstone basement, with adjoining cylindrical and gated cushioned room. It is available to hotel guests only, to be booked privately and by the hour. L'Hôtel, 13 rue des Beaux-Arts, Paris 75007; www.l-hotel.com.

The 16th Arrondissement of Paris is the aristocratic area.



Pictures: (centre, top and bottom) Rachel Oakes-Ash

It is also where you will find the Sofitel Trocadéro, which is home to Paris' only champagne bar, Le Dokhan, a hop, skip and cloud-nine jump from the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe. Champagne was invented by the French and is drunk like water in 50 varieties at Le Dokhan, where you are likely to find a Deneuve or Depardieu whetting their palates. From Bollinger to Krug to Château Lafitte and Pommery Brut Royal to the fashionistas' fave, Cristal, champagne is served with caviar, dah-link. When you're bubbled up, meet for a tryst in the lift, a vintage Louis Vuitton trunk: apparently, confined spaces are a French aphrodisiac. Hôtel Trocadéro Dokhan's, 117 rue Lauriston, Paris, 75116.

HAYMAN ISLAND, AUSTRALIA

If Noah's Ark was an island it would be Hayman, in Queensland, where the designer-clad animals come in two by two. The island's only resort is built for couples, with discreet outside bathrooms open to the sky. Book a massage for two at the Hayman Spa and return to your room to find a path of rose petals leading you to your bath – filled with bubbles and with chilled champagne on the side.

Helicopters await, and will drop you and your loved one on a secluded beach on a nearby uninhabited island, where you can pretend you are Adam and Eve for the day with wicked baskets of gourmet food to tempt the devil in you. Just make sure you don't fig leaves when the pilot comes back to pick you up.

Five restaurants service the resort, which offers

everything from fine dining to a five-course chef's invitation dinner, with matching wines, in the kitchen. Enter this resort alone at your own risk and prepare to declare loudly to waiters at each meal: "My partner is not well, he's having room service but I will have the duck, please," to keep tutting couples' pitying stares at bay. See www.hayman.com.au.

LINDT CONCEPT STORE, AUSTRALIA

Chocolate is known to produce the same chemicals in the brain as an orgasm – which makes it a sex substitute or a sex enhancer. For singles, you cannot walk past the world's first fine-dining chocolate store in Martin Place in the centre of Sydney. Located in premises vacated by the Banc restaurant, the Lindt Concept Store serves wicked chocolate delights that bring on ecstasy. How better to spend Valentine's Day than slathered in melted chocolate fondue not far from Sydney Harbour and the curves of the Opera House? The Lindt Concept Store, 53 Martin Place, Sydney.

TRAVEL LIKE CASANOVA

The world's greatest lover, Casanova, was also one of the world's great travellers, although one suspects he remained on the run to keep the fathers of those he seduced at bay. The single traveller following in his footsteps, from Venice to Padua, Rome, Corfu, Milan, Geneva, Prague and Vienna, and finishing in Spain (the guy sure got around) may learn a thing or two about love. At the very least, he will find out about the train timetables of Europe.

SIROCCO RESTAURANT, THAILAND

Who would have thought Bangkok could be a city of romance? Move over Venice: this town may not have gondoliers in striped shirts but it does have the Sirocco Restaurant, the world's highest outdoor eatery.

This is definitely not a restaurant you'll want to go to alone. The sweeping staircase that leads the diner down the outside terrace to the dining room below demands a flowing cocktail frock and James Bond on your arm. If you don't have a date then don't sit close to the edge: it's 65 floors down. A constantly changing coloured neon bar alerts you to where it is should things become blurry later on. Just follow the pretty lights to the man who will pour your Martini.

If you find yourself single after dinner, then head inside to the Distil bar for some cruisy tunes to lament your love lost ... and to get you fired up to meet the new love of your life. In case of rain, ask for the private dining room inside with floor-to-ceiling wine bottles. Yes, they're all full; we checked.

Clockwise from far left: the dizzying heights of Bangkok's Sirocco restaurant; a charming old carousel in Paris; the sun sets over gondolas in Venice; and scattered rose petals set the mood for a luxurious bath on Hayman Island.