

The World's Most Romantic Escapes

By Leigh Fergus

Come February—the most romantic month of the year—you may be dreaming of an escape with your loved one to a special place...somewhere you can enjoy some quality time together. But where? You've probably already “done” Venice, Paris, and Niagara Falls... So where to this year? Luckily, we, at *International Living*, have been checking out some of the most seductive sites. In this special report, we've decided to let you in on our top 10 secret hideaways. Got your passport ready? Here we go...

1. Spice up your winter

Zanzibar... The name alone is invitation enough to elope to the wilderness. This group of two spicy islands and its handful of islets off the coast of Tanzania, East Africa, is just perfect for a winter getaway. The vibe is casual and relaxed (think barefoot-exotic) with dazzling sun on the palm-fringed beaches and inviting turquoise sea. The abundance of fresh seafood and exotic fruit should spice up your stay. Why not take advantage of your time here to visit the forest, where cloves, vanilla, pepper, and cinnamon are gathered, and bring some home to carry on that warm glow in the kitchen?

If you crave exotic, but with an even more exclusive cachet, nearby Mnemba Island is a more luxurious romantic escape. This petite resort is private, with complete pampering service, only 10 beachside bandas, and the most breathtaking beaches in the Indian ocean. Don't strip off right away, though—this is a Muslim country after all.

2. Golden beaches and precious stones

Equally spicy, but for those who prefer a more old-fashioned style of wooing, **Sri Lanka** is hard to beat in the winter months. In fact, the country was originally colonized by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British because of the valuable spices that abound here. The colonial-type hotels offer impeccable service as in days of yore. But, for a really romantic stay, why not rent one of the villas on the southern coast of Tangalle. Looking like an Asian Gatsby's holiday home, villas are surrounded by tea or coconut plantations, with a beach of golden sand within easy reach. And, for the cherry on the cake, do include a visit to Kandy, the former capital of Ceylon and the last seat of the Singhalese kingdom, where you may find yourselves tempted by the precious stones: who would not melt at a cool sapphire or fiery ruby?

3. “Lost” in French Polynesia

If you dream of somewhere more remote, where love-birds can enjoy each other's company without fear of bumping into any acquaintances, try **Wallis & Futuna**. These two islands, with their three kings, are just about as far from civilization as you can get in Polynesia, hidden discretely between Samoa and Fiji, only accessible by flying from New Caledonia. To add to the sexy vibe, you'll be served in French, and can enjoy champagne with your

spectacular sunset—and real coffee and croissants to the sound of the tropical morning birdsong.

4. A Pacific island gem

For a somewhat more accessible destination, but with more than a whiff of gunpowder about it, having been a pirates' hideaway, you can't get much dreamier than **Contadora**, a privately-owned island off the southern coast of Panama, in the Gulf. This baby of an island was once famous for its pearls and diamonds, the name itself meaning "counting house." Gazing out to the bluest of seas, or diving together to explore the reefs, will create precious memories for the future. And this undiscovered paradise offers almost total privacy...

5. Spellbinding Italy

Try as we may, we can't ignore Italy. Our recommendation for romance is **Sorrento**, south of Naples. This charmingly-hued town, perched on a cliff overlooking the Mediterranean coastline, is guaranteed to make all lovers go weak at the knees. We don't know what it is about the place...the light, the sheer beauty of the town and views, the atmosphere... Or perhaps it's the scent of orange blossom in spring, the tantalizing proximity of Capri and the more discrete Ischia, the glimpses of lemon orchards and olive groves from between centuries-old buildings... Whatever it is, it all adds up to a heady philter--and you'll find yourself spellbound.

6. The great indoors

The pretty fishing village of **Tofino** on Vancouver Island, Canada, is perfect for nature-loving couples looking for a hideaway in a stunning setting. (The Wickaninnish Inn with its views of the Chesterman beach comes highly recommended as a stylish *and* romantic hideyhole--but plenty of more affordable options can be found.) An eco-rich gem in an already dazzling crown of outstanding beauty, Tofino is a great place for couples who want quality time together in the great outdoors. This is where you can enjoy good food in style--including some of the finest seafood in the western world--hot springs, deserted walks on miles of sandy beaches, whale- and seal-watching, kayaking, and breath-taking scenic flights over the wild coast of British Columbia. Watch out for eagles, too. Even in winter, if the weather isn't pleasant outside, the lodges are so cozy you'll be only too delighted to snuggle up together for a little storm watching.

7. Luxury at The Great Wall

For a truly unusual experience, and if money is no object, then run away together to China... **The Commune by the Wall** is an exclusive resort about 25 miles outside of Beijing, within sight of one of the most famous structures in the world, the Great Wall. Nothing to do with communal living and everything to do with avant-garde style and decadence, the Commune is the lovechild of the country's favourite designer, Pan Shiyi. Comprising a stylish group of unique villas designed by 12 top young Asian architects on an extensive property with magnificent views of the wall, it is one of the hottest hotels in Asia, complete with butler service. Among the villas for rent, you can choose, for example, the Bamboo Wall with its cool and serene ambiance echoed by indoor ornamental pools and signature bamboo, a place where two can gaze out over the hills or hold hands under the starriest of skies at night, or the Suitcase House where the soft beds and most glamorous of kitchens are all hidden out of sight by a series of ingenious trap doors, leaving room for you to concentrate on each other. And, with one of the world's most intriguing capitals just a quick drive away, who's to stop you from slipping from this modern palace to play imperial games in the Forbidden City?

8. Undiscovered Ibiza

For a chance to get together in an even more off-the-beaten-track hideaway, **Ibiza** ticks all the right boxes. Although this Balearic island is more famous as a clubbing resort than a lovers' trysting spot, the northern area is usually overlooked by thrill-seeking tourists and remains unspoilt and wild, uncrowded and warm. Starting off with gentle walks down the narrow streets in the old town of Ibiza will provide you both with a foretaste of the local color before you wend your way to the quiet northern end. Here you can take in the spectacular cliffs plunging into the Mediterranean and follow winding paths down to one of many charming hidden bays to watch the timeless rhythm of the waves--you are never very far from one of the island's 50 superb beaches. Don't forget to rent a boat to cruise in the sun and stop at any of the myriad rocks and islets that are scattered in the surrounding crystal waters. And check out the modern art center or one of the many art galleries of Ibiza town for a unique souvenir of your romantic escape.

9. A step back in time...

Steeped in history, the ancient city of **Granada** in southern Spain, is guaranteed to set your heart racing. The lace-like sculpted details of the Alhambra palace-cum-citadel and the soothing water features in the courtyards are picture-perfect memories to treasure. The name "alhambra" comes from Arabic, meaning "red castle," but can also be charmingly explained as "by the light of torches" to describe the effect of the flames used when construction carried on at night. The Alhambra, on a hill overlooking the city of Granada, is an imposing structure steeped in romantic history, a reminder of a time when Islam meant luxury and forbidden desires, and so hand in hand, you will wander the shady paths of the palace bordered in oleander and fragrant myrtle, retracing the footsteps of Moorish princes or Catholic monarchs. Don't miss the tallest of the towers, the Torre de la Vela in the oldest section--where, on certain dates, the bell was rung by young girls to ward off the threat of spinsterhood--or the Lion Court, otherwise known as the garden of paradise. If you can tear yourselves away from this poetic place, one of the many other things to do in this relaxed city is to visit the gypsy cave dwellings, or simply head downtown for a refreshing glass of iced *horchata* (a smooth milk-like drink) on one of the squares and then linger lovingly over the prolonged cocktail moment of *tapas*. A room in the Granada *parador* (a national hotel in sites of great interest), located in the Franciscan monastery section of the Alhambra with a sensual flower-scented courtyard, should be booked at least several months in advance to complete a perfectly romantic holiday.

10. Happily ever after

And finally, but not least of all... **Prague**. What could be more romantic than a visit to the former capital of Bohemia, now fast becoming *the* destination for honeymooners? This city in the Czech Republic is bursting with the details that count for lovers: fairytale castles, cobbled lanes through perfectly preserved medieval quarters, mysterious passages, outdoor cafés, gothic cathedrals, lively bars, the historic Charles bridge...the city of 100 golden spires is yours to enjoy. And Prague is even more enticing on winter evenings when the gas lamps lend an air of mystery to the narrow streets and the castle is shrouded in mist. You can escort your loved one around town in an exquisite horse and carriage to start off your own personal fairytale here or rent a vintage car to take your bearings. How about continuing your idyl on a relaxing private cruise along the river Vltava to view the magical skyline, many of the main sights, and the surrounding countryside? After all this excitement, why not take time out *à deux* at a relaxing spa, with a special massage and treatment package. For the ultimate in candlelit dinners, it may be difficult to choose just one from the wealth of excellent

restaurants, ranging from intimate and elegant, to historical and grand, Art Nouveau or contemporary, with views of the castle, river or squares. The Pálffy Palác is beautiful baroque, for example, with crystal chandeliers to match, while the Sarah Berhardt is as French as they come--outside of France. You'll just have to stay a bit longer to try them all.