



Sentimental journeys

Valentine's Day is an excellent excuse for an exotic escape. **Jane L. Levere** takes some tips from a bespoke travel expert

Although travelling can be romantic at any time of the year, Valentine's Day is a perfect time to share special sights and experiences with a loved one.

Philippe Brown, of London-based bespoke travel company Brown + Hudson, and a master at arranging romantic getaways, tells of a trip an American client commissioned for his girlfriend, which included a picnic in a farmhouse, with live cello and classical guitar music.

They travelled in a vintage Fiat 500, the girlfriend's dream car, which they later shipped back to the United States.

On another trip, a couple travelled to an Icelandic glacier, where the husband-to-be presented his fiancée with a beautifully carved ring of ice in lieu of a real diamond, which she chose later. Here are five of Brown's favourite Valentine's Day escapes.



Philippe Brown

Namibia

This country's breathtaking scenery is what attracts Brown, as it does Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt, whose daughter, Shiloh, was born here in 2006. Scenic highlights, says Brown, are the "starkly beautiful, otherworldly landscapes – deserts, salt pans, bushlands, mountains, spectacular canyons and rivers with incredible colour contrasts. The wild solitude of the Skeleton Coast inspires and touches the soul, while the sounds – the wind whistling in the dunes – are mystical, spiritual and sensual."

Lovers can do some of the finest stargazing in the world here. They can also savour the spectacular scenery from the air on a private, aerial safari, via Cessna, along the coast, or in a hot-air balloon at dawn, greeting the rising sun over the iconic red dunes with glasses of champagne in hand.

Where to stay: Sossusvlei Lodge www.sossusvleilodge.com, which Brown recommends for its cutting-edge design and one of the best stargazing observatories in Africa, and Wolwedans Dune Lodge (choose the mountain view suite, www.wolwedans-namibia.com).

How to get there: South African Airways via Johannesburg to Windhoek. Cathay Pacific also flies to Johannesburg.

India

Although Agra's Taj Mahal is at the top of every list of romantic spots, Brown recommends going off the beaten path, to the Thar Desert, in northwest India, to enjoy the solitude and beauty of this glorious setting.

The adventurous can ride into the desert on thoroughbred Marwari horses, to track the rare and beautiful blackbuck antelope, or take a camel ride into the dunes at dawn. Another option: visiting the colourful rural settlement of the

Bishnois, eco-activists whose advocacy dates to the 15th century. Those who believe food is the way to a lover's heart can take a cooking lesson from a member of Rajasthani royalty, Rashmi Singh, who also happens to own posh hotel, Mihir Garh, which Brown describes as "an exquisite pleasure palace that stands on top of a sand dune at the desert's edge".

Where to stay: Mihir Garh, www.mihirgarh.com

How to get there: Jet Airways via New Delhi to Jodhpur.



Diamond mines seen from the air along Namibia's Skeleton Coast (left); the Thar Desert in northwest India (bottom left); safari vehicles in Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania (right); a bride and groom pose on the waterfront in Havana, Cuba (below); a Buddha statue in the Rock Temple in Dambulla, Sri Lanka, about 150 kilometres north of Colombo (bottom).
Photos: AFP, Corbis

Cuba

Brown describes this island getaway as "luscious, sublime and altogether sexy: an intoxicating mix of wonderful Havana – with its crumbling but gorgeous colonial buildings, vintage cars and music in every bar and on every corner – and little-visited, sleepy towns inland or in the south, with golden beaches and turquoise waters."

Brown says February is the ideal time to visit, since the stormy autumn season is over, and it is still not too hot or crowded; the Habanos Festival, an international gathering of Cuban cigar enthusiasts, also takes place then.

To ramp up the romance, Brown recommends walking along

Havana's historic sea wall, the Malecon, on a warm night, while enjoying the sunset and watching the city come alive. Then relax with a mojito at El Floridita, a small, cosy bar once frequented by novelist Ernest Hemingway, where old-school Cuban music is still played.

"Apart from the cigars and rum, it's possible to find great vintage pieces and antiques, paintings and sculpture in Cuba," says Brown. **Where to stay:** Hotel Nacional de Cuba in Havana, the city's top property, which sits on a bluff overlooking the Malecon and dates back to the 1930s (www.hotelnacionaldecuba.com).

How to get there: Air France via Paris to Havana.



Tanzania

"Most people think of going to Tanzania only during the northern hemisphere's summer holidays, to see the world-famous migration along the northern border of the Serengeti. But in my opinion, February is an even better time to visit. It's the summer season in East Africa, with pleasant temperatures and short, sporadic, rains that freshen things up but don't stick around," says Brown.

At the top of his to-do list here is the Ngorongoro Conservation Area in the southern Serengeti, to watch the February wildebeest calving season, when hundreds of thousands of calves are born and must learn to walk within minutes to avoid falling prey to predators.

Brown recommends a climb up Mount Kilimanjaro, on a less-popular route – with customised expedition tents and mountain guides. A breathtaking sunrise at the summit caps the trek. Follow this with an ultra-luxurious mobile safari camp, where you can track the wildebeest migration Hemingway-style.

If you're jewellery shopping, look for tanzanite, the country's finest, striking blue, rare gemstone.

Where to stay: Nomad's mobile Serengeti Safari Camp (www.nomad-tanzania.com).

How to get there: Qatar Airways via Doha to Dar es Salaam, Emirates via Dubai to Dar es Salaam, South African Airways via Johannesburg to Dar es Salaam. lifestyle@scmp.com

WORKS OF HEART

Here are some of Philippe Brown's top tips for romantic trips

Do

- Visualise the whole journey from beginning to end to ensure that every step of the way is smoothly organised and magical.
- Add little personal touches that speak to your partner's heart. For example, ask your hotel to decorate the room with their favourite flowers.
- Create an experience that ties particularly well to your partner's passions or interests. Your partner loves dogs? Why not spend time with a team of huskies on a sledge in the Alaskan wilderness?
- Stay in intimate, smaller or quirky hotels or lodges rather than big chain properties.
- Make the journey about your partner, not about yourself.

Don't

- Leave arranging your trip to the last minute. Planning well in advance will always pay off.
- Pack the itinerary with too much activity. True, you need to keep a good pace, but also allow for plenty of downtime.
- Skimp on details – a chauffeur-driven car to the airport gets things off to the right start.

Jane L. Levere



Sri Lanka

"It was to this tiny jewel of an island that, according to the Ramayana epic, Princess Sita was abducted by the demon king, Ravana. Her husband, Rama, pined for her so much, he built a causeway from India to Sri Lanka to bring her home," says Brown. "With such a plethora of romantic charms – the warm, golden sands of the west and south, cool misty mountains that hug ancient Kandy; endless tea plantations that fringe the hill country around Ella; or the temples, ruins and historical monuments in the Cultural Triangle – it's not surprising Sri Lanka was the setting for such an epic love story."

Activities here that might inspire your own love epic are a champagne picnic at Hakgala Botanical Gardens, the exotic pleasure gardens where Ravana held Sita captive; a walk through the countryside of Ella, through tea plantations to temples and waterfalls such as the Ravana Ella Falls, where, according to legend, Sita once bathed; a hot-air balloon ride over Galle, a fortified port city, founded by the Portuguese in the 16th century, that is now a Unesco World Heritage Site; or a private game drive around Yala National Park, famous for its leopards. Brown's company helps clients make their own aquatic documentary near Kalpitiya, where, led by guides, they can swim with whale sharks and dolphins and have the adventure filmed by professional underwater cameramen.

If a proposal is on the cards, you're in the right place: Sri Lanka is famous for its gemstones, including sapphires and rubies, and fine artisans who custom-make jewellery.

Where to stay: Ceylon Tea Trails (www.teatrails.com) in the Bogawantalawa Valley, Sri Lanka's only Relais & Chateaux hotel, with tea planters' bungalows for accommodation, or Amangalla (www.amanresorts.com/amangalla/home.aspx), an Aman resort within the ramparts of Galle.

How to get there: Cathay Pacific Airways or Singapore Airlines via Singapore to Colombo.



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