
ARTICLES



Valentines for Men

Looking for a city break to treat your partner on Valentine's Day? Sky Travel's Paul Horsman explores three options on your behalf.

Rome

Between gorgeous lookouts, intimate piazzas and the general passion of community, Rome is one all-embracing romantic setting. Against your best defences, it will have you gushing *Ti amo* throughout the trip. More importantly you'll be in the good books for months if you surprise your partner with a Valentine's break here.

We all know Rome for its Renaissance Palaces and the famous ruins of the distant past, so if you're both visiting the city for the first time then you should tick a few cultural boxes. We suggest you start the day at Michelangelo's Campidoglio or Capitoline Hill from which you can look over the Roman Forum area. Once you've captured the moment, walk east along the Via dei Fori Imperiali, taking in a view of the remains of the Imperial Forums.

This route should lead you right to the Coliseum, which still remains ancient Rome's greatest architectural legacy. Created in A.D. 72, the oval arena was used for bloody combats between gladiators and wild beasts. Now a mere shell, it's fascinating to imagine how it once seated 50,000 people all screaming for blood as more exotic animals were shipped in from the far corners of the empire to satisfy jaded tastes. Ok, so it's not the most romantic of images. But it's hard not to be impressed by the backbreaking labour that went into building the greatest of amphitheatres.

Other highlights in Rome include Trevi Fountains, which is now on everyone's itinerary thanks to the romantic film 'Three Coins in the Fountain', and Ponte San'Angelo, the photogenic bridge which now towers Castel Sant'Angelo.

However, Rome offers temptations of every kind and your other half will be in her element if she likes to shop. You might find hidden charm and good value bargains in

lesser-known neighbourhoods but it's worth heading to the touristy Piazza di Spagna (Spanish Steps) via dei Condotti. This street is one of the richest in Italy, as well as one of the best for shopping in Rome.

If your budget doesn't stretch to Versace, then sway her towards the parks. The greatest garden of Rome is the Villa Borghese, the Palace's wonderful outdoor grounds that lie on four hectares of land which are full of tree-lined avenues, fountains and rare plants.

If you haven't yet managed to sweep her off her feet, then simply wine and dine her the Italian way. Italians take food very seriously, with each proud region specialising in their own dishes, so ask your waiter for that specials menu. Traditional Italian meals can often last a couple of hours and usually consist of an appetiser, followed by two different courses with a side dish. And when it's all washed down with some fine Italian wine, we're sure the romance will continue throughout the night.

Barcelona

Paris may be the capital of romance but Barcelona doesn't do badly for those with love in mind. There's the beaches, culture, balconies overlooking the streets, good food and wine; no wonder it was voted the best city break at the recent British Travel Awards. If you want to whisk off your other half here for Valentine's Day, then here are a few suggestions to add even more sparkle into the romance...

To really get in her good books, make the trip that little more special by booking yourselves into a spa hotel. There's a small handful to choose from in Barcelona, all offering a comfortable stay with the option of using their spa facilities. This normally includes a swimming pool, sauna, steam room and Jacuzzi, and you'll also be able to treat her to a selection of beauty treatments.

But if you must tear yourself away from the hotel, you'll discover Barcelona is more than just your average city. It has a privileged position on the north eastern coast of the Iberian Peninsula so enjoys Mediterranean weather and even has a beach. If you're unfamiliar with its history, you might be surprised that such a modern city preserves its historic Gothic centre almost intact. When exploring, an obvious place to start is La Rambla; an iconic and busy street in central Barcelona. The 1.2 kilometer long tree-lined pedestrian mall in the Barri Gotic connects Placa Catalunya in the centre with the Christopher Columbus monument at Port Vell. It's usually full of street theatre, cafes and market stalls, making it the emotional hub of the city. Also, at the bottom of Las Ramblas, you can hire a horse and carriage to take you both around the sights.

If your partner is passionately into art, culture and beauty, then a few days in Barcelona will be a real Valentine's treat. Cultural highlights include Gaudi's still unfinished Sagrada Familiar to marvel at architecture like no other. You could also take in some great art at the MACBA museum or even enjoy a classical or jazz concert at the Palau de la Musica Catalana, one of the world's finest halls.

For an early evening cocktail with a romantic setting, head to Tibidabo where there's a bar called Mirablau which overlooks the entire city. Then after dark, join the locals for pub crawling at the Barri Gotic for a huge selection of tapas bars, wine bars and even Irish pubs. Or, if you're thinking more along the lines of a romantic dinner, try the two-Michelin starred restaurant; Arola. It's quirky, pop-art décor in purple and lime green gives it a modern feel but it's the menu which impresses most; with its mix and match tapas style dishes. Fancy some bite-size pieces of Manchego cheese?

How about some Iberian ham or preserved shellfish? Or for a touch of Arola magic: steamed mussels with citrus juice and saffron. DJ nights complete the picture of this stylish contemporary restaurant, as well as a perfect Valentine's Day in Barcelona.

Prague

When it comes to weighing out costs, it's easy to see how chocolates and roses can seem more appealing than paying out for a trip to Paris or Rome. But if budget is the problem, a worthy alternative is Prague. In the centre of Europe, it's becoming an extremely popular destination and a great place to snuggle up during winter months.

The medieval city centre remains an evocative maze of cobbled lanes and ancient courtyards, watched over by an 1100 year old castle. Yet despite this historical feel, the traditional pubs and eateries have been amplified by the increase of gourmet restaurants, cocktail bars and trendy cafes.

For a romantic start to the day, you can't beat a leisurely wander to Old Town Square, the oldest and most important of historical Prague. It's surrounded by the Old Town City Hall with the famous Astronomical Clock, the impressive St Nicolas Church, as well as many houses and palaces of various architectural styles.

Prague Castle is definitely worth a visit too as it's the largest ancient castle in the world. Show off your knowledge by casually dropping into conversation that it was constructed in the 9th century. For extra brownie points, add that it's about 570 metres long, 128 metres wide (the castle that is.)

After a spot of lunch it's time to really prove your love, although you'll probably need a little help from the Credit Card. Shopping in Prague has found a welcoming public, especially for the clothing shops that sell inexpensive but trendy gear. The average Czech salary is still low compared with other European countries and most retail prices reflect this. Therefore, you can afford to splash out on the love of your life without making a huge dent in the wallet. If you're feeling really generous however, high end retailers such as Lois Vuitton, Hugo Boss, Christian Dior and Versace have all opened branches here.

If all that spending makes you feel dizzy, head north of the river to take a breath of fresh air at the peaceful Letna Gardens. Here you'll be able to refresh yourself with a couple of glasses of Prague's cheapest beer at the informal alfresco bar. The views over the city are amazing.

Looking for yet another romantic spot? The Charles Bridge over the river Vltava is definitely one of the most beautiful places in Prague. It is the oldest bridge in the city, built between the 14th and 15th century and is lined with statues and lamps.

By this point you should both be feeling hungry. Until recently, dining in Prague was better described as an "adventure", so not what you call a smooth or relaxing experience. Today, the city's chefs are growing in confidence but it's worth booking in advance if you're looking for something special. Why not check out 'La Scene', 'Mozaika' or 'Monach'? All three are fine examples of places that make you feel hungry and sexy the moment you walk in – perfect for Valentine's Day.