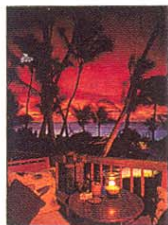




Waterfront romance

Lakeside,
riverside or
seaside:
Hotels by the
water beckon
romance.

by
Judy
Alexandra
DiEdwardo



If you want to be a real hero this Valentine's Day, all you'll need for a scintillating tryst with your one-and-only is an adventurous spirit, some extra cash and a good carry-on wardrobe.

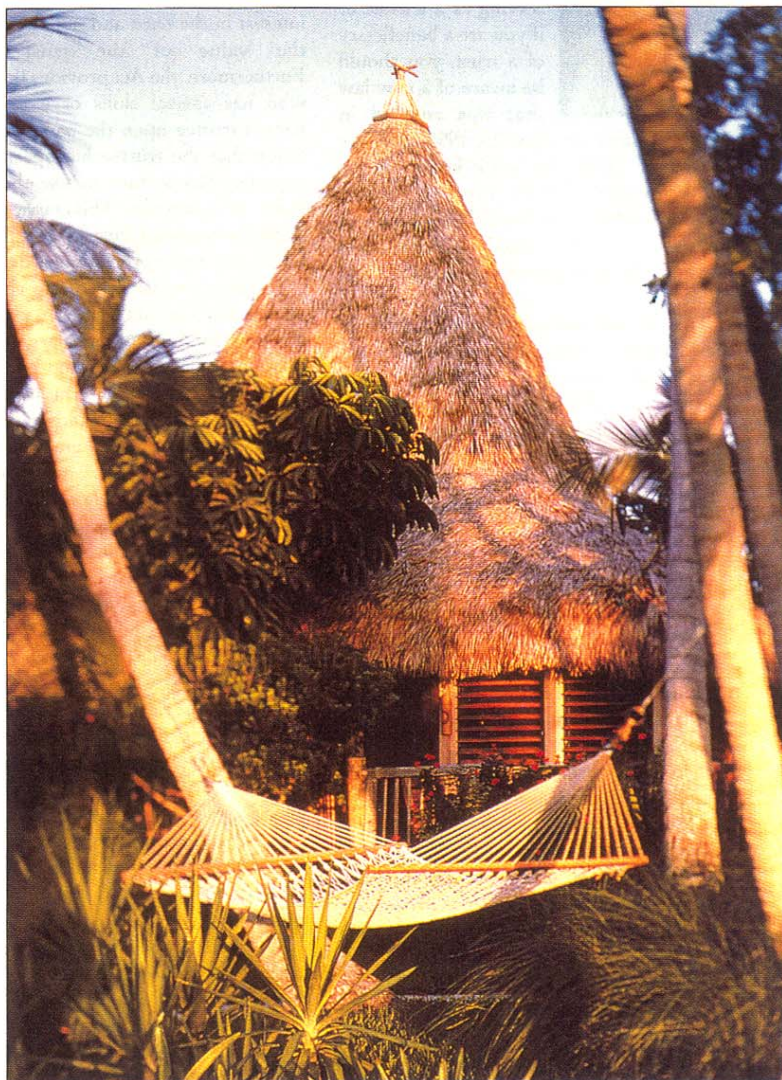
Romantic waterfront retreats are your best bet. They appeal to the senses, and transform couch potatoes into Romeos and harried soccer moms into Juliets. From blue ripples spilling onto a tropical beach, to white-peaked waves crashing against a rocky coastline, to the soothing sounds of a lazy river running through a vintage town, the hypnotic quality of water goes a long way in the romance department.

We've found a collection of ultra private getaways for every predilection, geographic preference and pocket-book. But after you sample one, it's likely you'll insist on visiting them all. So put your travel agent on speed dial and start packing.

Little Palm Island Little Torch Key, FL

Romantic getaways don't get any better than this high-tech Garden of Eden located 3 miles off the coast of the Florida Keys. You'll need a few paychecks for this prestigious Relais & Chateaux charmer, but it's well worth the overtime. Accessible only by boat or seaplane, the island's turquoise blue waters and dense tropical foliage conjure up visions of an enchanted South Pacific atoll—minus the 20-hour flight. After all, paradise should be easy.

Blessed with balmy breezes and warm weather year-round, Little Palm once served as a private fishing camp and secluded haven for Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy



Find your own piece of paradise at Florida's exclusive Little Palm Island retreat.

and Nixon. It remains a choice destination for government, social and celebrity figures looking for privacy, tranquility and pampering at this modern-day Gilligan's Island. Little wonder why televisions, telephones and alarm clocks aren't welcome. They clash with the ambiance, not to mention one's sense of amour.

But for those who can't part with their laptops, in-suite modems are available. Seems silly, though. Ensnared in a thatched-roof villa with a private ocean-view sundeck, outdoor shower and

The Rest a sunken whirlpool built for two, it's doubtful you'll be thinking of e-mail. Instead, life will be reduced to scheduling body massages and treatments at the spa between gourmet meals and watersports.

But no matter how enthralled you find yourself, be sure to dive or snorkel at nearby Looe Key National Marine Sanctuary—one of North America's last living coral reefs. Inside the sanctuary's waters, some of the world's most endangered corals and tropical fish thrive.

Enjoy the resort's freshwater swimming pool while waiting for your dinner of pan-seared yellowtail snapper with lobster dumplings, watermelon relish and tamarind pineapple jus. A perfect day ends with an ultra-romantic sunset sail around the island to catch the last glimpses of daylight. Not to worry. Tomorrow's another day.

➤ *Rates: High season from \$850; low season from \$550; (800) 343-8567. 28500 Overseas Hwy., Little Torch Key, FL 33042*

Aurora Inn Aurora, NY

If your idea of romance includes a roaring fireplace, rare vintages and five-star cuisine, look no farther than the Aurora Inn on the sweeping shores of Cayuga Lake, about four hours from New York City. Nothing speaks to the heart like food, and no one understands that better than the epicurean—for whom the Aurora beckons.

Just ask Henry-Paul Benveniste, general manager. One of France's most celebrated chefs, Benveniste has been at the helm of the quaint 15-room guest house since 1988. He knows what makes Cupid's arrow fly. His inventive menu



The Aurora Inn specializes in food, views and romance.

pays homage to regional specialties and locally produced wines that rival the world's best. Indigenous freshwater fish and organically raised meats and vegetables are parlayed into signature entrées that have earned the Aurora its loyal clientele and national acclaim.

"Romance involves all of the senses," says Benveniste, who encourages guests to stroll along the lakefront or through the gardens before or after a candlelit dinner. "It's one of the charms of an inn versus a large hotel for guests who desire a special experience."

The Aurora was built in 1833 by E.B. Morgan, a founder of *The New York Times* and president of the Wells Fargo banking division that handled California Gold Rush claims. It has been at the center of the Aurora community since its opening, attracting an elite guest list from throughout the world including George Balanchine, Robert Frost and Norman Mailer.

The lakefront is also home to several vineyards and wineries as well as thousands of Canada geese that winter on its shores, creating an enchanting backdrop to this stunning country inn.

"It's the small moments that create a romantic experience," says Benveniste, smiling. "Moments that become great memories."

➤ *Rates: \$75 to \$135; (315) 364-8888.
Main Street, Aurora, NY 13026;
www.aurorainnfingerlakes.com*

Catherine's Inn Wilmington, NC

The owners of this romantic five-room B&B overlooking the legendary Cape Fear River in downtown Wilmington are "southern hospitality" incarnate. Which is why guests often depart feeling as if they've been adopted by an extended family.

"This place reminds me of home," smiles Catherine Ackiss, who grew up on a rural Virginia riverfront and envisioned recreating the memory after relocating to Wilmington in 1988. She and her husband, Walter, purchased their first bed-and-breakfast a few blocks from their present dwelling. But when the historic 1883 white clapboard



Catherine's riverside inn also offers city access.

home went on the market five years ago, they sold their B&B and purchased this riverfront estate with its distinctive wraparound porch, formal gardens and gazebo.

It is one of the only inns overlooking the Cape Fear River and is within easy walking distance of downtown Wilmington. But couples usually prefer exploring the town via horse-drawn carriage or by riverboat.

Among the accommodations, the Waterview Room is my favorite, with its purple walls offset by white-and-yellow prints, and generous bay windows that make it easy to forgive the ruffled curtains. The riverfront Sleigh Room is equally charming and slightly more masculine with its hallmark iron sleigh bed and antique walnut love seat once owned by Walter's grandmother. The entire house is decorated with a mix of family heirlooms and collectibles that create an authentic coziness—including an 1897 grand piano once owned by Catherine's mother.

As with any good-mannered host, steaming pots of coffee are ready when you are, as is one of the heartiest breakfasts this side of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Guest rooms are filled with fresh flowers daily depending on what's blooming in the garden—and at the local florist. But if it's Valentine's Day, expect the full treatment of roses, chocolates and a champagne breakfast.

"Our guests become part of the family," Catherine says. "And we wouldn't have it any other way."

➤ Rates: \$99 to \$115; (800) 476-0723.

410 South Front St., Wilmington, NC 28401

The Inn at Mystic Mystic, Conn.

If the last time you visited this historic harbor town was with your fourth-grade class, a lot has changed. Including you. Amid the sheltered coves of Mystic Harbor and Long Island Sound, this waterfront enclave is home to the handsome 1904 Colonial revival mansion where Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall honeymooned. What could be more romantic than such a star-studded pedigree?

"The couple came in 1945 at the invitation of their friend, Fred Mosel, who owned the house and later sold it to my father," explains Owner and Manager Jody Dyer, who purchased the property with her sister, Nancy Gray.

It's easy to see why the siblings chose this picturesque sanctuary. The grounds are a nature-lover's nirvana. Depending on the season, it's likely you'll spot owls, hawks, geese, osprey and other species indigenous to the area. Year-round residents include a family of snow-white muted swans that have become a signature attraction, as are the oversized wicker rockers that line the Inn's Victorian-style veranda.

Much has changed since the days of Bogie and Bacall, but the ambiance of this five-room inn has not. Thoughtfully landscaped into 15 acres of thickly wooded hillside, this stately white-clapboard house sits adjacent to the 40-room Motor Lodge, four-room Gatehouse, 12-room East Wing and award-winning Flood Tide restaurant. Garden enthusiasts especially appreciate the English-style garden with its boxed hedges and colorful perennials, including a lineup of daffodils, tulips and daisies.

The in-room fireplaces and whirlpools truly make this one of New England's most romantic hideaways. "Guests fall in love with this place and return year after year," Dyer says. Now we know why.

➤ Rates: Inn from \$125 to \$235; Motor Lodge/Gatehouse/East Wing \$75 to \$275. (800) 237-2415. Junction Routes 1 and 27, Mystic, CT 06355; www.innatmystic.com ✈

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a muscle acting up.*

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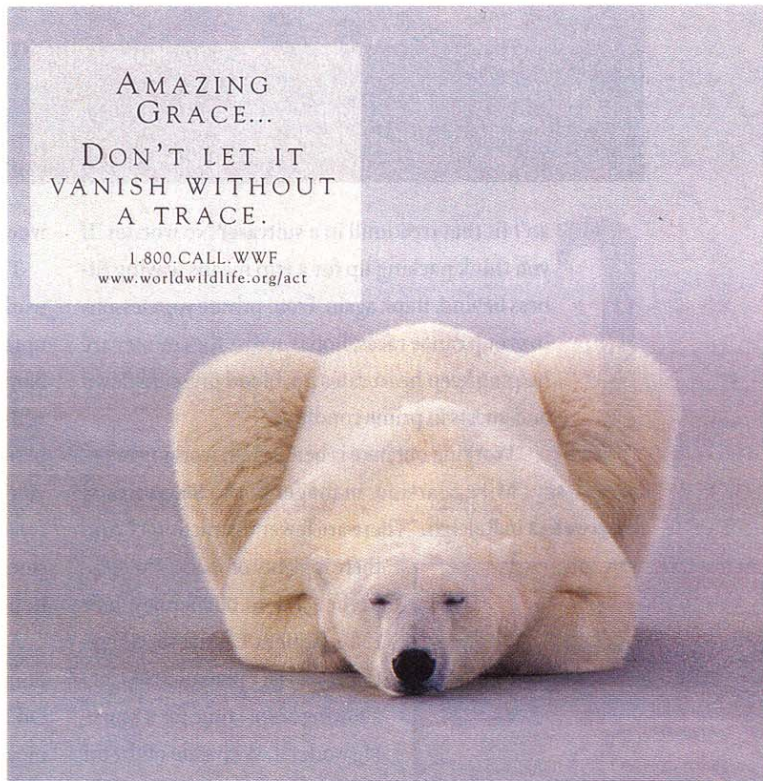
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