

Just the two of us...

Luxed-up resorts, idyllic eco-island beach hammocks... with romantic getaways out there to suit every budget, why should we need an excuse to book a vacay à deux, asks Elizabeth Elphick



Your love might not cost a thing, to paraphrase the wonderfully naive and fabulously wealthy Jennifer Lopez, but celebrating that love with a romantic vacay could seriously set you back in the finance department.

So while you might want to loosen the purse strings for a honeymoon or an important anniversary, there are also options that offer value for money, meaning they needn't be reserved just for special occasions.

Living in the UAE, we have plenty of idyllic destinations on our doorstep and top-class hotels offering discounted rates. From a Robinson Crusoe-like island escape to an elegant train journey, we've found six award-winning destinations for every budget.

The mini break

SHANGRI-LA'S BARR AL JISSAH RESORT, OMAN

WHY WE LOVE IT Firstly, it is less than an hour's flight away, making it the perfect spot for a long weekend (or even a short weekend) away. Secondly, it ticks all the boxes for a totally relaxing romantic break.

The 24-acre luxury property has spectacular views of dramatic mountains and the Gulf of Oman. It houses three hotels catering for different markets and watersports include diving courses, snorkelling and boat trips. Of course you could just relax on a private beach or next to one of the three swimming pools. In

the evening, wander down to the sea-facing Sultanah restaurant, which has been designed to look like the interior of a luxury cruise liner, for a romantic dinner. The menus vary according to the 'port of call' on the liner's itinerary for the night and children aged 12 and under are not allowed.

DETAILS Shangri-La's rooms start from Dh1,146 per night. The spa package includes a daily buffet breakfast, a hammam for both of you on the first day and an Aroma Vitality or Chi Balance treatment for both on the second day – this package costs from Dh1,950 per couple per night and is valid until May 31. Driving to Muscat takes four to six hours, or flydubai flies there for around Dh580 return. Visit www.shangri-la.com for bookings.



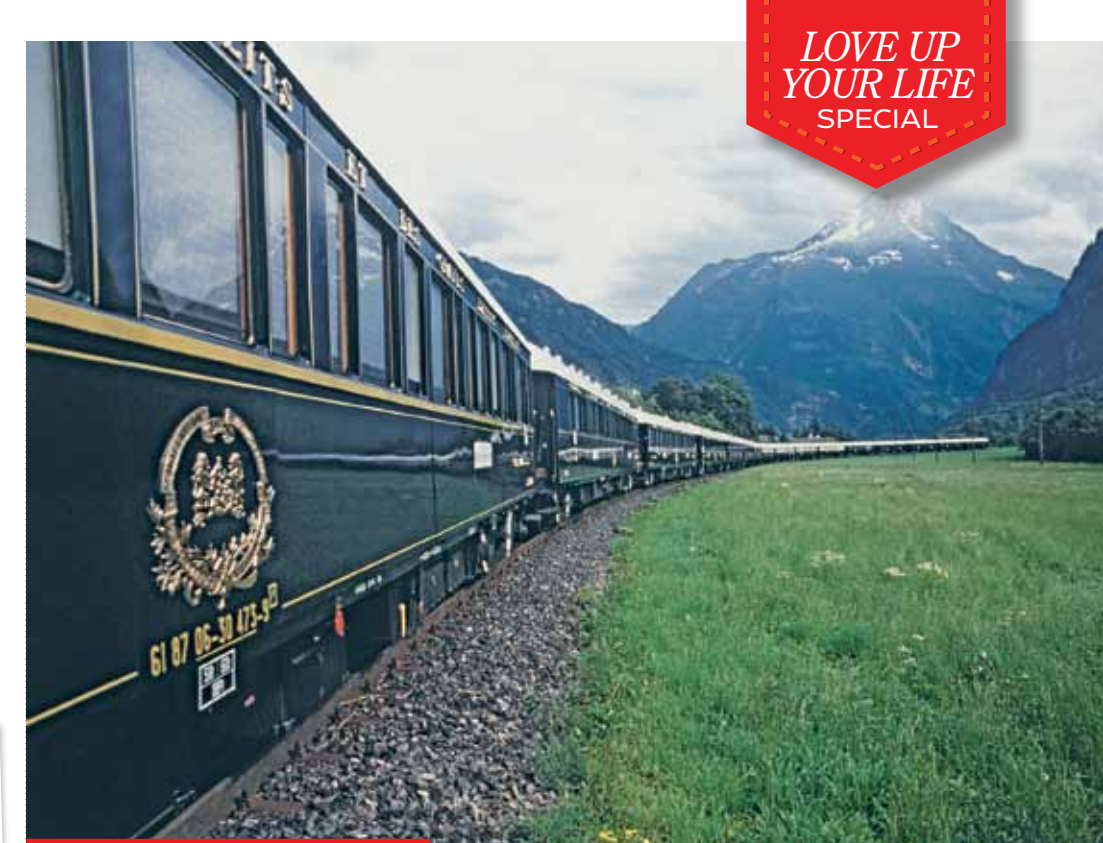
Kayaks are available at the resort free of charge and guided outings can be arranged



Rugged mountains meet the blue waters of the Gulf of Oman – beautiful at sunset!



Chi Spa includes a herbal steam room, tundra and tropical showers and an ice fountain



LOVE UP YOUR LIFE SPECIAL

Classic romance

VENICE-SIMPLON ORIENT-EXPRESS (VENICE-VIENNA-PARIS)

WHY WE LOVE IT For the ultimate relationship celebration, what could be more romantic than travelling from Venice, which Lord Byron described as "the fairy city of the heart", to Paris, which is arguably the City of Love, on board a luxury train?

The Orient-Express is made up of carriages dating back to the 1920s and 1930s, each with a fascinating history and all restored to their original glory. By day, your cabin is a comfortable lounge, but by night, while you enjoy a gourmet dinner in the restaurant car, stewards will convert it into a luxurious bedroom, complete with crisp linen and fluffy towels.

On this four-night, five-day experience you depart from Venice late afternoon for an overnight journey to Vienna. You spend two nights in the Austrian capital at your own expense. Why not stay immersed in tradition and book in at the five-star Hotel Sacher Vienna, founded in 1876, which is in the city centre opposite the Vienna State Opera?

On the fourth day, you rejoin the train in the afternoon for the overnight trip to Paris and arrive just after breakfast the following day.

On the journey, enjoy afternoon teas and breakfasts served in the privacy of your own cabin.



Journey back to a more elegant era of travel, complete with uniformed stewards



Gourmet meals prepared by French chefs are served in vintage dining cars

One of the highlights of this trip is the amazing wardrobe it requires – stepping back to an age where travel was gracious and elegant means you can dress up to the nines. The company's motto is that you can never be overdressed aboard the train.

DETAILS The train journey will cost you around Dh11,800 per person. For details and bookings, visit www.orient-express.com. Rooms at Hotel Sacher in Vienna cost upwards of Dh1,960 per night. Visit www.sacher.com. Emirates flies one way to Venice from Dh2,540, and from Paris to Dubai from around Dh2,210. Visit www.emirates.com.

The luxury desert resort

AL MAHA, DUBAI

WHY WE LOVE IT Lose yourself in time as you enter this Luxury Collection resort, situated in the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve. With luxuriously furnished Arabic-themed villas spaced far apart, each with its own infinity pool, you will hardly see another visitor for the duration of your stay.

From your villa's private sundeck, absorb the sight of sand dunes rolling into the distance and Arabian oryx and gazelles grazing nearby.

The resort prides itself on its personal attention to its guests' needs and staff will take care of everything from your pillow to food preferences, your itinerary and even pre-set the ambient temperature of your swimming pool.

Desert activities include guided nature walks, falconry and a gentle drive through the desert in a luxury 4x4. For maximum romance, take a



Luxurious interiors, magnificent views and almost complete privacy make Al Maha an ideal escape

leisurely camel ride into the desert to the crest of a dune and watch the sun setting while enjoying bubbly, snacks and fruit.

And if you haven't had enough time by yourselves, the resort can arrange an intimate dinner for two in the desert, set up Arabic style, with low tables, cushions and lanterns.

DETAILS Prices start at Dh6,400 per night for two sharing a Bedouin villa (excluding charges and taxes), including breakfast. If you book the luxury Royal Suite, two complimentary spa treatments are included. Al Maha is a 65-kilometre drive from Dubai. Visit www.al-maha.com for more information.



Exotic indulgence

MAYA HOTEL, TANGALLE, SRI LANKA

WHY WE LOVE IT If the stresses of modern life are taking their toll on your relationship, head for the tranquil setting of this pretty boutique hotel in Sri Lanka. Wake up to the sounds of cicadas and feast on leisurely meals in the garden, breathing in the fresh, clean air scented with frangipani flowers and fruit trees. Owned by acclaimed interior designer Niki Fairchild, the tastefully restored 19th-century manor house is situated amid tropical gardens and surrounded by paddy fields on Sri Lanka's southern coast.

Spend your time lazing in hammocks or next to the 20-metre L-shaped pool in this intimate five-suite resort. You are invited to pick breadfruit from the garden when it is in season, which the kitchen will make into curry for you.

If you want to explore the local area, take a 15-minute drive to the seaside town of Tangalle to explore



This boutique hotel has only five suites, ensuring an intimate setting



All rooms at the Maya Hotel face out on to the 20-metre deep pool

the local temples, or to watch the sun go down on its unspoilt sandy beaches. The Udu Walawe wild elephant park is a short drive from Maya and the hotel can organise a special picnic lunch to take with you.

From December to April you can go on whale and dolphin watching excursions from Mirissa, 40 minutes away, or take a night safari to Rekawa Beach to see endangered marine turtles nesting.

To amp up the love factor, romantic dinners can be set up anywhere on the two-acre property.

DETAILS Room rates at Maya start from Dh697 per night, including breakfast. Visit www.mayatanggallesrilanka.com. Emirates flies to Sri Lanka from Dh1,340. Visit www.emirates.com.



Island intimacy

NOMAD'S LAND, CAMBODIA

WHY WE LOVE IT If total intimacy is the name of your game, you can live out your desert-island fantasy at this eco-friendly resort in the unspoilt archipelago of Koh Sdach in Koh Kong province.

Koh Totang island is just 1.3 kilometres long and 500 metres wide, and Nomad's Land is the only guesthouse on the island.

With a peaceful private beach and just five bungalows, this is the ideal spot for serious relaxation and one-on-one time. You can while away the afternoons taking in the crystal-clear

waters from your hammock, snorkel along the coral reef or take a 20-minute hike through the jungle to get to the secluded beach on the other side. Each bungalow has been built in a different style, and all offer sunrise views over the water.

The owners are committed to preserving the island's unspoilt nature, so although there is no running water or electricity, solar panels provide all of the power and rainwater is collected and purified for drinking and showers.

The Eco Romance package includes a private full-day boat trip for two around the archipelago, with stops for snorkelling and a barbecue lunch. It also includes a sunset boat trip with a picnic basket full of snacks and drinks, as well as a candlelit dinner for two – a three course feast with bubbly on the beach or on your own private terrace.

DETAILS The five-nights, six-days Eco Romance package is Dh5,500 for two people and includes a bungalow with a private bathroom, three meals a day and private taxi transfers. If you prefer, you can choose an accommodation-only option and pay between Dh73 and Dh147 per night. Emirates flies to Phnom Penh from Dh3,620 return. Visit nomadslandcambodia.com.



Scenic beauty

LA RESIDENCIA, MALLORCA, SPAIN

WHY WE LOVE IT This luxury boutique hotel has breathtaking views of both the dramatically beautiful Tramuntana Mountains and the shimmering blue Mediterranean Sea.

Its centuries-old twin stone manor houses sit in lush gardens among olive and citrus groves on the edge of the artists' village of Deià.

There are several places to eat in the hotel and nearby, but for a special treat, dine on Mediterranean dishes by candlelight in the El Olivo restaurant, set



La Residencia has two outdoor pools and another indoors



The spa has open-air treatment rooms, so you can soak in mountain views as you have a massage



The restored manor houses that make up the hotel are thought to date back to the late 1500s

in a 16th-century olive press. The hotel ensures the romantic ambience is not broken by asking guests to surrender their mobiles to the hostess on arrival.

Three of the spa treatment rooms have open-air terraces so you can gaze at the mountains while you are having a massage. If you get bored of lazing by the two outdoor pools (there is also an indoor pool), you can explore the village on a Vespa, or ask the hotel to arrange a hot air balloon ride. For art lovers, you can take a guided tour of Deià and meet local artists.

For maximum romance, the hotel will arrange for a picnic lunch to be carried by donkey up to its rustic mountain refuge for you. There you can cosy up to a fire, if it's cold, and indulge in the feast as you take in the majestic views.

DETAILS Rooms start from around Dh1,140 per night. For details, visit www.hotel-laresidencia.com or contact Dubai-based company The Travel Collection (www.ttc.ae). Emirates flies to Palma de Mallorca airport for Dh3,800, including the connecting flight. Visit www.emirates.com.