

Glossy

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Heartless!

Valentine's isn't always
a bed of roses

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GLOSSY GETAWAYS

Romance renewed during secret rendezvous along Italian coast

By Becca Hensley

SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN STATESMAN

Dog-tired from a challenging daylong hike, we drag our rain-soaked, mud-splattered bodies through the doors of a modest hotel off the main square in Ravello, Italy.

I'm worried about my husband. He's too quiet, and I wonder if all those shepherd's trails, serpentine turns and stony steps above the Gulf of Salerno have done him in. But when we leave our fellow hikers at the front desk and sequester ourselves in our room, he suddenly comes to life. Emulating James Bond, he rushes to the window and draws the blinds. He gestures to me to be quiet and dramatically waves his arms to keep me from collapsing on the bed.

"Thinking him utterly mad, I head toward the shower, but he blocks the door:

"Not yet," he says. "We've got to get out of here."

"What?" I cry. He shushes me and now, I know he's gone completely bonkers. "We're leaving," he says, grabbing my hand. "I've got a surprise for you."

And indeed he does. Like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat, he extracts a carry-on bag from his suitcase, tells me to throw in something nice, then all but steamrolls me through the door. We skulk out of the hotel, bags in hand and cross the piazza.

We wind through a narrow alley or two and climb many steps. Moments later, an elaborately carved, pillared, portal flanked by stone lions greets us. Through it, across a coffee-floored, vaulted room, a rivet-



Genius Loc!

ing seascape is captured in a panoramic window. It draws the eye like the horizon line in a landscape painting.

I conclude we stand at the threshold of a private villa until a doorman materializes, urges us inward and says, "Welcome to the Hotel Caruso."

We cruise passed the Neapolitan style furnishings and mosaic-covered walls of this former 11th-century patrician's palace humbly. My first instinct is to smarten my untidy hiker's hair. Preening, I dust off my dirty shorts just as a solicitous gaggle of staff surrounds who we are.

"You're late," says a posh woman who hugs me and introduces herself as Janet. She eyes me curiously. "If you need

The bedroom area of the deluxe suite at Hotel Caruso in Ravello, Italy, has a private terrace with a breathtaking view of the sea.

HOTEL CARUSO

Just more than an hour from Naples, the hotel is perched on a cliff 2,000 feet above the sea. Half board guest rates include breakfast and dinner: \$892 for one person in a double room to \$4,484 for two people in a superior suite. www.hotelcaruso.com
For Weddings along the Amalfi Coast, contact Linda Gatto at La Lampada di Aladino. www.amalfi-wedding-planner.com E-mail: info@amalfi-wedding-planner.com

a hairdresser or makeup artist, I can arrange it." I look toward my husband, who shrugs.

Then, she continues, "Explain it to me — this renewal of vows — what is it exactly? We don't really have it in Italy."

"Yes, explain it," I say, looking at my glowing husband. Janet escorts us to our suite,

a room called The Trilogy for its three lancet windows that frame the sea beyond. Beckoned by the view, we step out on the private patio to find we dangle above the bejeweled Amalfi Coast, an impression made more vivid by the Champagne we sip. We're still in hiking togs when the phone rings.

"The wedding planner is here," says our posh mother hen. Still speechless, I rush to the bathroom to shower. And that's when I balk. It's such a sybaritic room, so indulgently Roman and marbled and luxurious, I consider skipping this whole surprise renewal of vows thing to just linger in the tub. But I get over it, and without the help of the makeup artist, I manage to look slightly presentable.

Downstairs, we meet the wedding planner, Linda Gatto, who runs La Lampada di Aladino (Aladdin's Lamp), creators of custom weddings along the Amalfi Coast. In tow, she has her mother, Carmela, and Giovanna da Amato, a charismatic poet who will reside over our ceremony. Someone hands

me a bouquet of white roses. A concierge smiles and tells us we "look much better."

My husband, Carl, having organized all of this via the Internet, greets Linda like an old friend, and at that moment we all connect in a joyous sort of union. These are our metaphorical maids of honor, or best women, as it were.

Surrounded by our Italian intimati, we walk through a garden infused with the seductive scent of lemons to an impertuous infinity pool. Posed there, veritably floating above a sea awash with a thousand turquoise tones, we hear our serenade: the dulcet song of the waves. Suddenly, it thunders. Alarmed, Janet says, "If you'd like we can go inside to la cappella, the hotel's historic

PHOTO: J. S. GARDNER

5 ROMANTIC GETAWAYS FOR YOUR VALENTINE

Romance is everywhere. Curl up by a fire and gaze at the snow-covered countryside in New York's Hudson Valley. Enjoy a luau near a private lagoon in Hawaii. Cuddle in a horse-drawn carriage in Paso Robles, Calif. Dine in a rose-strewn room in Dallas. Enjoy backstage bubbly after the opera in Orlando, Fla.

Here, from five grand American hotels, are packages to immerse you and your Valentine in romance. Some are top-dollar; others are virtually a steal. Pick your passion:

MOHONK MOUNTAIN HOME: Let it snow: you'll be tucked away in a Victorian castle in the Hudson Valley, 90 miles from New York City. Check into your room, enjoy chocolate-covered strawberries, then consider ice skating on a rink next to a 39-foot stone fireplace before you indulge in a candlelight dinner. Breakfast the next day is included. \$150 per person; call (800) 772-6646, www.mohonk.com. Also in February, the hotel features chocolate spa treatments at an additional cost.

HOTEL CHEVAL, PASO ROBLES, CALIF.: The 'Be Still My Beating Heart' package pulls out all the stops at this stylish small inn: one night's stay in a luxury guest room, a bottle of Champagne, a 60-minute in-room massage and port and chocolate next to one of the inn's fireplaces or in your room. Also included is a romantic horse-drawn carriage ride pulled by the Cheval's Belgian draft horse, Chester, and — if your Valentine really wants to spoil you — 10 percent off a jewelry piece purchased from the Hotel Cheval Jewelry Collection. Packages start at \$475 per couple. Book at (866) 522-6999, www.hotelcheval.com.

GRAND BOHEMIAN HOTEL, ORLANDO, FLA.: Romance is what you love, and if you love shopping and opera, this package is for you. Check into the lavish Bohemian and have a welcome cocktail and gift basket. You'll enjoy a meal with wine pairings and a performance of "Die Fledermaus," followed by a private backstage performance by members of the Orlando Opera company as you enjoy strawberries, chocolate and Champagne. The package includes dinner, a limo ride out to The Mall at Millennia for shopping at such stores as Tiffany & Co. and David Yurman. It's \$6,500



Mohonk Mountain Home in New York's Hudson Valley has its own ice skating rink.

Sandra Steinh

ROYAL KONA RESORT, KAILUA KONA, BIG ISLAND, HAWAII: What's more romantic than Hawaii? At this luxurious, recently redecorated resort on the big island amid lush trees and emerald seas, enjoy the saltwater lagoon as well as the 16-acre resort's two swimming pools and an oceanfront luau. Starting at \$104 per couple on travelworm.com or at (888) 700-8342. Packages including air fare are also available.

THE MANSION ON TURTLE CREEK, DALLAS: Much closer to home, settle into the grand dame of Dallas hotels. The package includes an elegant room, valet parking, Champagne, chocolate-covered strawberries and a dozen long-stemmed roses. In the comfort of your room, with a CD of love songs to set the mood, you'll get a couples massage, then a romantic dinner from the kitchen of executive chef John Tesar, whose new menu is drawing passionate raves. An aromatherapy bath, a rose petal-strewn turndown service and pillowcases embroidered with your initials complete the setting. Then wake up the next morning to a full breakfast for two. \$895 per couple. Call (214) 559-2100



HOTEL CHEVAL

Hotel Cheval in Paso Robles, Calif., is an intimate place with only 16 rooms. Outdoor fireplaces enrich the chilly nights in this city south of Monterey.

and ask for the Escape to Romance package.
— Helen Anders

"Anything is possible," she says.

Because our ceremony is symbolic, there's no paperwork, a plus considering the infamous bureaucracy of the Italian system. But Linda knows how to navigate that with ease; many from across the globe have been married under her tutelage here on the Amalfi Coast.

As quickly as they emerged to administer their magic, our new friends vanish. I glance at my husband, who glows with the successful outcome of his wedding vow secret plot. Delirious, I decide it might be a dream, but when the waiter returns he carries my bouquet, left behind somewhere like Cinderella's shoe at the ball. We place it in a vase and ponder this place — Ravello — where dreams fuse with reality.