

# ROMANTIC RETREAT

Celebrate St. Valentine's with a quick break at one of ADRIAN GILLAN's top short-haul lovers' treats!

## PARIS

THE French capital is cloaked in myth and cliché but, rest assured, few places on earth can be 'gayer' than the roads of the intimate Marais and the neon-lit Les Halles districts just north of Notre Dames. And few things more romantic than a stroll by the Seine or a heartfelt snog up the Eiffel Tower. Where more apt for that blissful tête-à-tête over supper than at cosy, classy **Le Gai Moulin** (4 rue St Merri; Tel: 0033 1 48 87 47 59), especially if you love garlic and snails breath? **Hotel Central Marais** (33 rue Vieille du Temple; T: 0033 1 48 87 56 08) is Paris' only strictly gay hotel, above the hardly-enthalling **Le Central** bar. But - purse permitting - you shouldn't encounter any problems booking into any of the larger, classier, pricier accommodation options, à la Ritz. **Eurostar** ([www.eurostar.com](http://www.eurostar.com)) takes you effortlessly from London Waterloo to the heart of Paris in just over two and a half hours.

## PRAGUE

PRAGUE'S haunting beauty is undisputed but the city's real fascination lies deeper, in its history. Each cobbled street contains a wealth of stories to delight all true lovers. The spread-out gay scene's lack of stainless-steel wipe-down modernity also helps make it the ideal romantic holiday destination, rather than a party spot. Meander through the **Old Town Square** (Staromestske namesti), surrounded by beautiful medieval architecture; cross the famous fourteenth century statue-lined **Charles Bridge to Prague Castle**, protecting the huge **St Vitus' Cathedral** within; explore the former **Jewish Quarter**; take in some dizzy views from the ex-communist TV tower; enjoy some sung drama at the **State Opera**; and utterly ignore all the hoards of nice, well-scrubbed, chunky local boys who look like they're rushing between the latest gay porn shoots. Food and drink is dirt cheap - half, or a third, the price of Paris.

## VIENNA

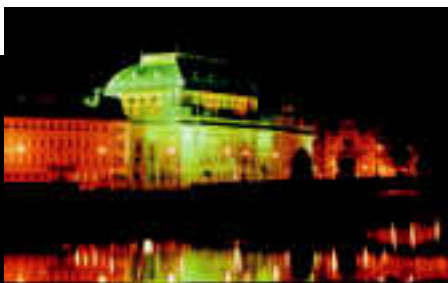
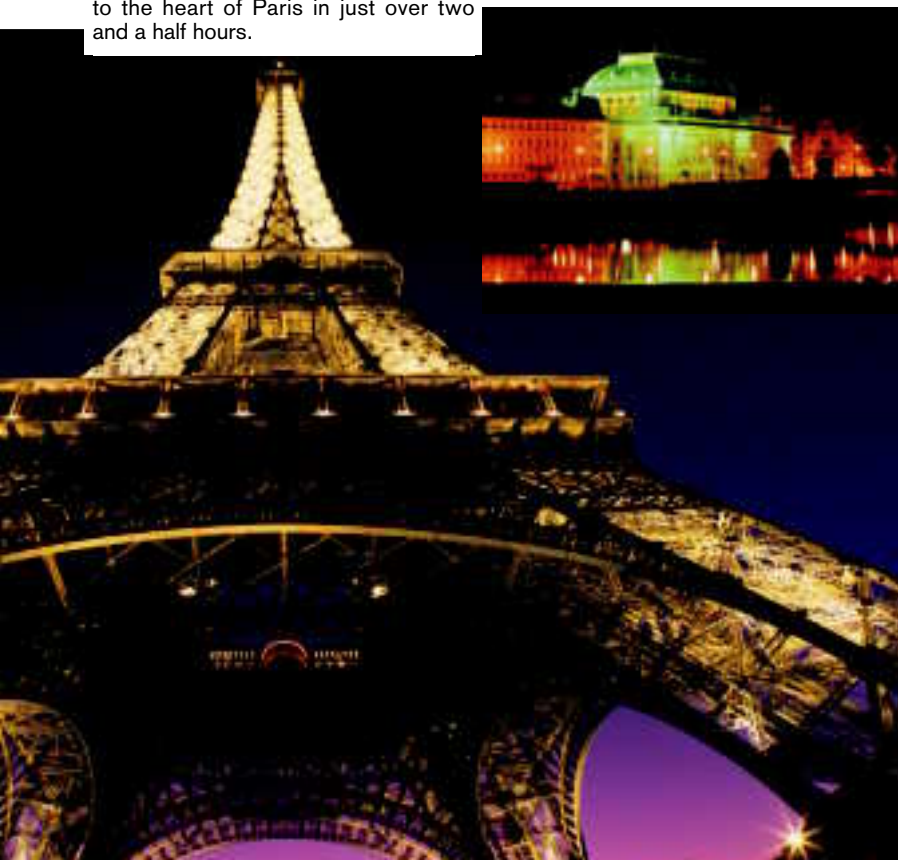
From Strauss to Freud, from the last days of the Habsburgs to the dark days of war: all true lovers should waltz at least once around the grand gay decadence only found in Vienna. Sitting in a Viennese coffeehouse, you can both gaze into each other's eyes, whilst simultaneously drinking in the history and autumnal fading aura of a once great empire, torn apart by The Great War and left savaged by the next. There are oodles of bars in the main queer quarter in the **6th District**, a short distance west of centre, but perhaps the most quintessentially queer Viennese experience, is the magical **Cafe Savoy** (Linke Weinzeile 36; Tel: 0043 1 586 7348), a classic old wood, brass and leather corner café with a camp interior of chandeliers, gilt statues and feathers, multiplied by the largest single-piece mirrors in Central Europe. Best by night. Gay-run **Pension Wild** (Langegasse 10; Tel: 0043 1 0 406 5174; [www.pension-wild.at](http://www.pension-wild.at)) offers modern, spacious rooms with breakfasts hale-and hearty; or for something more up-market, try the swish, gay-friendly Conran-designed **Das Triest** (Wiedner Hauptstrasse 12; Tel: 0043 1 589 180; [www.dastriest.at](http://www.dastriest.at)) just south of **Karlsplatz**.

## CASABLANCA

WE'VE all snivelled at least once over Bogart and Bergman in the 1942 film noir classic; but Casablanca's romantic heart goes back far beyond that - far beyond spy havens and French colonies - to where the timeless, shifting African sands meet the Gulf-warmed North Atlantic. The intricate-yet-vast **Hassan Mosque** is the second largest holy building in the world, after the mosque in Mecca. The **Old Medina** is Casablanca's ancient, beating heart. Haggle hard at its lively market of colour and spice; wander through its narrow alleyways, transported back centuries. Explore the long piers at the city's modern port; or saunter through the **Parc de la Lique Arabe** - a beautifully laid-out garden full of tree-lined avenues. Splash out and stay at **Le Royal Mansour Meridien** ([www.lermeridien-casablanca.com](http://www.lermeridien-casablanca.com)) - Casablanca's most exclusive hotel - whose Moorish decor provides a calm oasis in the city centre swell.

## VENICE

Surely, few cities can claim to be more truly 'unique' than Venice - with its bridges and gondolas, canals and carnivals. Built on commerce - not just water - she was once one of the world's richest cities, as her alas now subsiding architecture still attests. **St. Mark's Basilica** in **Piazza San Marco**; the **Ducal Palace** in **Palazzo Ducale**; the **Rialto** and **Bridge of Sighs** (Ponte dei Sospiri): whatever you do in Venice, you'll most likely be in a queue. It's one of Europe's top tourist destinations and its countless alleys aren't wide. So it's wise to avoid mid-summer; and to stray a couple of alleys off the main tourist drag to find a spare table - and cheaper prices.



## NAPLES

NEAPOLITAN youths - young Romeos all - innocently couple and entwine upon mopeds, storming around town as if no tomorrow. Meanwhile, old **Vesuvius** - as in ancient times - sits poised ominously across the calmest of bays under a reddening moon. Ah Naples, birthplace of pizza and piazzas, Caruso and arias: you and your lover can't help but be carried away by the naive native ardour and drop-of-a-hat street-side drama of the unself-consciously stylish Southern Italian male. After all the raw humanity on show, you'll both crave some distractions. Head out east of town to the Ancient Roman sites of **Pompeii** and **Herculaneum** - preserved in time courtesy of Vesuvius in AD79; or get away from it all one day with a trip to the queer island haven of **Capri** - a gay mecca ever since the time of Tiberius; why, even Wilde's Bosie fled here after that infamous trial. Unlike nearby Amalfi, Naples is pretty unspoilt and very cheap.

## ROME

THE 'eternal city' - home of real-life historical loves and dramas, now almost elevated into myth - forms the fabric and foundation of much of wider Euro civilisation, stony, sun-kissed reminders of which sprawl out on almost every street corner, across all seven hills. **The Colosseum; Pantheon; Palatine Hill and Forum; Trevi Fountain; Spanish Steps; gushing green Tiber; St Peter's, Sistine Chapel and Vatican** (boo-hiss). Like Prague, not a bar or clubber's paradise; and thus ideal for queer romance. If true love is indeed eternal, then its home is surely this breathtakingly immortal city.



## VERONA

"Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona where we lay our scene..." So Shakespeare - who never left England - puts this Northern Italian gem on the world map, whilst creating the ultimate, timeless icon of male youth and ardour, whose gay legacy is still writ large on the Veronese streets to this very day. Home to countless real-life Romeos - not to mention one or two gents - it's more bars than Bards in Verona these days. If Romeo had been gay today he'd definitely have been based at chic **Café Bukowski** (Via Amanti 6; Tel: 0039 045 8011417) in a small side-street on the edge of Verona's old town, in a bend of the gushing **River Adige**. Then our homo hero would have popped across the bridge - either with his love, or in search of some - along the road to the eponymous **Romeo's Club** (Via Giolfino 12; Tel: 0039 3384037781; www.romeosclub.it). There is no gay hotel as such, but just over the river from Bukowski - en route to Romeo's - is your perfect pad: **L'Ospite** (Via XX Settembre 3; T: 0039 045 803 6994) offers stunning self-contained private apartments for as little as £35 a night.



## MARCHES REGION, ITALY

THE Southern Marches Region of Italy offers the three essential itinerary items for a romantic break: beaches, beauty and bargains! The vibrancy of the more modern town of **San Benedetto del Tronto** satisfies the more contemporary queen with the glamour of its **Riviera of the Palms**, a gorgeous 5km palm tree-lined promenade that boasts some of the finest white sandy beaches in Italy. Take some time out to absorb some history and explore the picturesque 13th century fortified village of **Acquaviva Picena**, which was recently noted by UK press as "a hidden gem of Italy". Then, nip over to the small town of **Ascoli Piceno** and lose yourself in its architecture and art; be sure to visit the **People's Square** with its magnificent porticoes and the **Municipal Art Gallery** and **Diocesan Museum**. Being the production centre for well-known Italian fashion designers such as Prada and Armani, the area is also a shopper's dream where great bargains can be picked up at their outlet stores. Standing majestically at the highest point in the area, 400 metres above sea level, stay at the **Hotel Abbadetta** (Via Abbadetta 36, Acquaviva Picena, Tel. 0735/764041), which boasts three swimming pools, a private beach and tennis courts.

## ORKNEY

YOU can't get much more romantic and remote than Orkney, off the north coast of Scotland: an assuredly relaxed and gay-friendly setting, the ideal location to detoxify and purge oneself of those big city scenes, or enjoy dotting isolation, far from the watchful crowd. Walk the many expansive beaches or cliff-top paths. Unlike Scotland's archly Protestant Hebrides to the west, the Northern Isles are far less religious, more steeped at heart in earthy Viking, pagan culture. Twenty minutes north of main town **Kirkwall**, brace yourself for a true treat: a stay at **Woodwick House** in Evie (Evie; Tel: 01856 751330; www.woodwickhouse.co.uk) where your gay-beckoning hosts - lovely young James and Thorfinn, his snow white cat - will lavish you with attention in front of cosy fires and over delightful home-grown suppers. The garden boasts its own private beach; gay blessings are possible in the dovecot chapel!



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Marches