

HONEYMOONS

WORTH GETTING MARRIED FOR

Luxurious, breathtaking, amazing.
How far would you go to stay at one the world's most spectacular destinations?

BORA BORA

If a picture tells a thousand words and a spectacular view leaves you speechless, it's quite possible that you might spend your entire stay at the Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora in silence, unable to utter a single word. Not that it would matter – they do say that one of the ways you know you have found the perfect partner is when intermissions in conversation aren't awkward. In Bora Bora, they would be signs of pure and total contentment.

The most well known of French Polynesia's Leeward Islands, Bora Bora was formed through volcanic eruption millions of years ago. Born from the sea rather than continental drift, the island is a place of dramatic colour contrasts: aqua marine waters and an endless blue sky are set against lush greenery, a stunning vista which is watched over by the peaks of Mount Otemanu and Mount Pahia.

Opened on 1 September 2008, the Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora is a brand new addition to the island and one of the newest properties to join the collection of the luxury hotel chain.

Set amid Bora Bora's coral atoll, whether you are staying in one of the 100 overwater bungalows or honeymooning in super luxe style in one of Four Seasons' seven beachfront villas with plunge pools, the massive expanse of turquoise ocean is visible at every turn. Set over 22 acres, the resort is a vast tropical grove,

bursting with coconut palms and private beaches – the true definition of Tahitian paradise.

It's obvious careful planning and consideration has been applied in the resort's construction so that guests are aware of their island surrounds at all times. The water laps a few feet below bungalow floors and because they are connected by branching piers, you can watch or swim with schools of fish right from your own private berth. Oversized lagoon windows allow picture perfect scenes to fill every indoor space; even the beds and bath tubs have unobstructed views of the lagoon!

Rich in indigenous culture, the resort blends a taste of the island's identity into every part of the property. Paying homage to its Polynesian connections, all of the resort buildings have traditional thatched leaf roofs, made from the leaves of the native pandanus tree, grown on local plantations and weaved by local craftspeople. Guest rooms follow through with framed Polynesian artefacts; mother-of-pearl fishing lures and coconut palm leaf fans.

French, American and Maohi cultures are captured in culinary form in each of the resort's dining experiences, whether it's in one of the four restaurants or the private dining options, where champagne, canapés and candlelit dinner can all be served at any island location of your choice. Room service also takes on a total VIP spin, with bungalow orders delivered via canoe.

Activities and entertainment options abound – but top of the recommendations list is relaxing. Though the views and oceanic smells are enough to lift the weight of the world from even the most troubled shoulders, your happy honeymooner state can be enhanced further with help from the full service spa.

Honeymoons simply don't get any better, or any more luxe, than this.

Room rates at the Four Seasons Bora Bora start at \$ 1,415 per night. For more info visit www.fourseasons.com/borabora.

– Kristy Meudell

The moment you arrive at Qualia's Long Pavilion you will understand what it means to be hypnotised. The expanse of the Whitsundays' glittering blue ocean stretching out onto the horizon not only provides a dramatic sense of arrival, it makes for a view so spectacular that any thoughts about your life pre-arrival are swept away in a glance (or, at the very least, checked in at reception until your departure).

Situated on the secluded, northern tip of Queensland's Hamilton Island, at Qualia you'll quickly discover time is of no importance, it's all about letting go. No clocks and no schedules, just a limitless supply of postcard views and heavenly silence, broken only by the sounds of an occasional bird or the steady hum of passing motorboats. This is all part of what the resort's creators like to call "the Qualia effect," a collection of deeper sensory experiences that encompass gentle ocean breezes rustling through the leaves, the Coral Sea lapping gently at the pebbly shore and the lingering smell of eucalyptus.

Opening the door to one of Qualia's accommodation pavilions is similar to walking into one of the world's best day spas. Four times larger than the average hotel room, the property is officially Australia's only six star resort, but there's nothing glitzy, gold, gilded, ostentatious or OTT here. Havens of luxurious indulgence, comfort and serenity, each pavilion's focus is on simple, sophisticated furnishings of natural materials, merged with cutting edge amenities. These are all seamlessly blended with the outside environment so you feel totally connected to the outside beauty (particularly at night time when a cacophony of wildlife sounds are delivered on the corrugated iron roofs).

You'll find each room interconnects – lounge then bedroom,

HAMILTON ISLAND

oversized bathroom with freestanding bath. Outside, a private patio with sun lounges, a day bed, outdoor setting and plunge pool.

The resort's Pebble Beach infinity edge pool is one of two climate-controlled pools, the one at Pebble Beach is a stone's throw from its namesake beach. Lined with a surplus of black and white striped sun lounges, it houses several cabanas set back in the lush gardens and a bar brimming with friendly staff to cater to every whim, be it ice cold water, frozen fruit sticks or a tropical-inspired cocktail creation.

The other pool stretches out in front of the main Long Pavilion, where you'll find the library, dining room, lounge, bar and buffet areas. Here, all your food and non-alcoholic beverages (as well as anywhere on the island) are included in the rates. Impressive, given the world class quality of their menus, which are matched with the climate, use seasonal produce and include two degustation options.

Free non-motorised water sports, use of an electric buggy and the option to book in for the most divine spa treatments only add to your stay. And, though a visit to Qualia does carry a six star price tag, it's definitely worth it. After all, what price can you put on such an experience, particularly when its as luxe and decadently rejuvenating as this.

Room rates start at \$1400 a night, or \$1600 with a private plunge pool. For more info visit www.qualia.com.au or call 07 4948 9532.

– Kristy Meudell

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MOROCCO

Morocco has garnered a reputation as a bustling destination but away from the snake charmers, market hagglers and steaming pots of tagine, in a secluded spot on the Atlantic coast, everything is still.

Driving down a seemingly endless dusty track, it's hard to believe a luxury resort for honeymooners is anywhere nearby. But then, striking wrought iron gates come into view, swing open and reveal a massive fortress. There, on the edge of a mesmerising lagoon, is La Sultana. Part of the Small Luxury Hotels Of the World collection, it emerges from the Moroccan sand like a mirage and it's hard to tell at first whether it's real or fantasy.

La Sultana is named after the Queen of the Sultan and has been built with all the luxuries one would expect with such a royal connection. Each of the 11 rooms in the exclusive oasis boasts a secluded entrance giving the feeling of true privacy. The suites feature Oleander ceilings, oversized king beds and a private balcony, the ideal spot to sip French champagne in the salt-water heated jacuzzi and admire the picturesque water views.

Of a morning, as you're feasting on a breakfast of eggs, fresh croissants, coffee and fruit, a man in a wetsuit wheels his bike along the beach, filling his basket with fresh lobster, spider crabs, clams, calamari and oysters. Come dinner, it will inspire the seafood platter as your obvious choice and it won't disappoint. But then, neither will your mealtime setting. Set up on a private jetty in the middle of the lagoon you'll sink into plush chairs at your candlelit table set for two, directly beneath the stars.

Everything at La Sultana has been designed with relaxing in mind

so it will be easy to find yourself sprawled out on one of the huge daybeds with thick white cushions, towels, chic sun hats and beach bags for much longer than you anticipated. When you get too hot, there's an infinity edge pool perfect for cooling off and someone is never far away should you get hungry or thirsty. Of course, there's always a bushwalk to a secluded beach, a kite surfing lesson or gym session if you desire.

A must, however, is experiencing the La Sultana spa. Past the Romanesque columns and sunken heated pool, in the heart of the property, relaxation is taken to another level. Secret passageways hide private marble saunas bursting with essential oils and scatterings of rose petals. The ultimate indulgence is the Hammam, a sensual bathing experience unique to Morocco. Specially designed for couples, you will be scrubbed with special soap and loofahs to release built-up stress and toxins, sending you into a zen-like state.

Afterwards you'll emerge completely rejuvenated. You'll feel so light you will literally float up the carved stairs to another romantic, candlelit treatment room. A body massage using pure local Argan oil, now hailed in the West as the latest wonder anti-ageing ingredient, will leave you with the softest skin you could ever imagine.

La Sultana is the place you fantasise about, but never believe really exists. You'll never want to leave and when you do, you'll make a promise to yourself to return again soon.

Rates start at \$589 per night per couple. For more info visit www.slh.com/lasultanaoualidia or call 1800 251 958.

– Harriet Farkash

LAKE COMO

Step back in time to a place where luxury and love are as much a part of the scenery as the deep, bright blue water and snow-capped Alps. Welcome to Lake Como – an achingly beautiful region in Northern Italy nestled along the Swiss border at the base of the Alps.

With its staggering scenery, mild Mediterranean climate and breathtaking villas, the area has long been an aqua playground for the rich and famous (George Clooney has a holiday home here), not to mention a honeymoon hotspot for the stars. When she was still Jenny from the Block, JLo and Chris Judd spent their honeymoon at the late Gianni Versace's palazzina and Avril Lavigne and Deryck Whibley loved it up on the Lake following their nuptials in 2006. When the glare of social spotlight gets too hot, Victoria and David Beckham often escape to the region to 'reconnect' while one of Hollywood's earliest power couples, Ava Gardner and Frank Sinatra, had many a romantic rendezvous on Lake Como's stylish shores.

If you're looking to immerse yourself in the romantic history of the region, a stay at the Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni is essential. One of the oldest and most famous villas in the area, Serbelloni first opened for business as a luxury hotel in 1873. Since then, it has welcomed such luminaries as Winston Churchill, John F Kennedy, Clark Gable and Al Pacino and in 2005, it was named one of the top five resorts in Europe by *Conde Nast Traveller*.

Wandering through the elegant residence is like stepping back in time as many original features remain: antique Persian carpets lead you through a labyrinth of hushed hallways and sweeping staircases, all glittering under the light of delicate crystal chandeliers. Ornate frescoes adorn the walls and ceilings and grandiose ballrooms invite impromptu dances and epic embraces.

The 61 rooms and 20 suites are spacious with vast, high-ceilings, neo-classical and art nouveau furniture and huge bay windows that frame flawless views of the Lake or park.

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During the day, stretch out by the aquamarine pool at the edge of the lake, which showcases a perfect panorama of lush tree-lined mountains. Hire a boat and cruise down the lake, stopping at ancient medieval towns and villas. The 18th Century Villa del Balbianello in nearby Lenno is open to the public and well worth a visit. Or lose yourselves in the hotel garden, which heaves with hydrangea bushes and rambling roses in shades of pink, purple and dusty blue. Cap it off with a picnic of local cheeses and Prosecco and toast your future together as the light fades from the day.

Being in a country of gourmands, dinner is naturally an impressive affair. For an incredible dining experience, book a table at the Mistral Ristorante. The Michelin-awarded restaurant is home to chef Ettore Bocchia, master of 'molecular cuisine' (an experimental type of cooking that uses scientific methods to combine unexpected ingredients). The seven-course degustation, including Sicilian prawns with guacamole ice cream and cuttlefish ink waffles, is the only way to do it properly. Save room for dessert – ice cream is made at your table in seconds with liquid nitrogen to freeze it before your eyes. Truly the crème de la ice-crème.

Room rates start at \$645 (375E) for a double room. The hotel is closed from November to April each year. For more info visit www.villaserbelloni.com.

– Sigourney Cantelo



VALS

If unique experiences, relaxation and exquisite scenery are high on your honeymoon radar, then look up Therme Vals in Switzerland. The sleek, stunningly designed spa makes the simple act of bathing one of the most magical experiences a couple can share.

The pretty alpine town of Vals, two-and-a-half hours south of Zurich, has a long history of bathing, thanks to a self-heating 30°C spring (rich in health-giving minerals now piped into Therme Vals). Twenty-five years ago, in a bid to revive tourism, the community purchased the 60s built hotel and commissioned celebrated architect Peter Zumthor to build a new bathhouse. Constructed using over 60,000 slabs of hand-laid, local quartzite in shades of grey, the resulting structure (opened in 1996) was a feat of great architectural importance, as elegant and meticulously constructed as a Swiss watch. Spa-goers and architects from around the world now flock to Therme Vals to admire and enjoy the sensorial experience it offers.

The hotel retains design elements and structure from the 1960s, but it's a kitsch-free zone. Most of the interior has been refurbished by Zumthor in a chic, minimalist style. The rooms in the main building showcase a view so heart-poundingly immense you'll need to sit down just to take it all in. Bright green hills studded with stone-roofed farmhouses and snowcapped mountains rise up before your eyes. This scenery begs to be explored on foot (or skis in winter).

The food is also top-notch. The hotel's restaurant, The Red Room, was awarded a commendable 14 by the prestigious French restaurant guide *Gault Millau* and uses local, organic produce with delicious results.

The star of the show though is of course the spa. The rooms in the main building are connected to the spa via an underground tunnel, so one can don the supplied robe and wander back and forth. The spa is open to the public during the day, but in the mornings and three evenings a week, it's exclusive to guests. The silent night bathing ritual (yes, no speaking) is truly magical when surrounded by the mountains.

Enter Therme Vals through copper turnstiles and walk through a hall where the iron-rich water spills down the stone walls. A cavernous, high-ceiling opens up to reveal a series of pools, designed to caress the senses. In the 'Resonance Room', neck deep 35°C water and a vaulted ceiling create acoustics that would make a tenor weep. You are struck by a chorus of monastic humming, which is being created by your fellow bathers. Heated to a mild 33°C, the 'Flower Bath' delights another of the senses – smell. Rosehip petals rush and swirl around you like a snowstorm and the floral fragrance fills your nose.

The outdoor pool is magnificent, with giant copper faucets you can stand beneath, getting a knot-relieving neck massage from the flow. Afterwards, mahogany recliners invite you to soak up the gentle alpine sunshine. In the evening the atmosphere is positively mystical with steam ebbing off the bath-like 30°C water.

Rates start at \$228 (133 E) per person per night for a double room and includes dinner at The Red Room and entrance to the spa. For more info visit www.therme-vals.ch.

– Sigourney Cantelo