

TODAY'S traveller

CORPORATE, BUSINESS, AVIATION, LUXURY & LEISURE TRAVEL MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY 2026 - ₹50



**WYNDHAM GRAND UDAIPUR FATEHSAGAR LAKE
THE NEW LUXURY FLAGSHIP**

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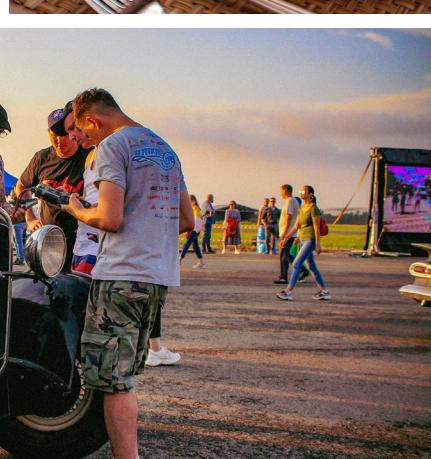
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WYNDHAM GRAND UDAIPUR FATEHSAGAR LAKE: THE NEW LUXURY FLAGSHIP

Wyndham Hotels & Resorts debuts a new flagship, a 26-acre estate built for weddings, getaways, and calm

TT BUREAU



Udaipur has always understood theatre. Light skims across the marble, boats draw lines across the water, and the Aravallis hold the horizon like a painted backdrop. Now, a new address on the shores of Fatehsagar arrives with the scale and polish that celebratory India increasingly seeks: Wyndham Grand Udaipur Fatehsagar Lake, a luxury retreat spread across a 26-acre estate. Built for grand Indian weddings, indulgent family milestones, romantic couple getaways, and serene heritage escapes, it aims to make each visit feel like a chapter you will want to re-read.

Across the world, Wyndham Grand is shaped around the idea that travel is the best excuse to enjoy the grand things in life. With hotels in sought-after destinations, the brand is designed to be upper-upscale yet approachable, turning special trips into stays that feel smooth, assured, and worth returning to. Wyndham Grand Udaipur Fatehsagar Lake joins a curated portfolio of 90 Wyndham Grand hotels in standout destinations around the world.

"Wyndham Grand Udaipur Fatehsagar Lake represents a defining milestone in our India journey. Udaipur is one of the world's most iconic luxury and wedding destinations, and this opening reinforces our commitment to expanding Wyndham's upper-upscale footprint in markets where culture, heritage, and hospitality come together beautifully. With Wyndham Grand, we are entering into the luxury space in India with a brand that truly reflects elevated experiences and global sophistication. This resort is a perfect blend of Rajasthan's timeless charm and Wyndham's global standards, designed to deliver unforgettable experiences to both domestic and international travellers," said Rahool Macarius, Market Managing Director, Eurasia, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts.

That word, connected, is important here. Connected to the lake that gives Udaipur its spell. Connected to the city's craft, colour, and ritual rhythm. And connected to the practical needs of modern travel, where the smoothness of the in-between moments often defines the holiday: arrivals,





Front Desk

movement across venues, timely meals, privacy when you need it, and space when everyone gathers at once. The ambition here is to make Udaipur feel cinematic without making it feel complicated.

LAKESIDE MAJESTY, CLOSE TO THE CITY'S ICONS

Fatehsagar Lake has a particular kind of calm. In the morning, it looks like brushed silk, pale and misty, with the hills softened at the edges. By evening, it becomes a mirror for gold light, and the city's romance starts to feel like reality. Wyndham Grand Udaipur Fatehsagar Lake takes full advantage of that mood. It sits by the water and rises towards the Aravallis, with the lake in front, mountains behind, and the open sky above.

City Palace and Jagdish Temple sit close enough for excursions, Shilpgram adds an artisan lens to the destination, and Neemach Mata Temple offers a hilltop pause between busier days. The resort itself is designed to feel like a private world, with manicured gardens and open spaces that never feel cramped. It is Udaipur with breathing room, where you can dip into bazaars and palaces, then return to stillness.

Families want an itinerary that lets children stay cheerful, and elders rest between outings. Couples want romance that does not need staging. Wedding groups want a setting that photographs beautifully, but also a base that keeps guests comfortable, well fed, and oriented across multiple functions. A lakeside estate does the emotional work, and the scale takes care of the logistics.

ROOMS OF ROYAL HERITAGE

Wyndham Grand Udaipur Fatehsagar Lake's 140 guestrooms and suites lean into a "modern Mewar" style of occasion, with heritage cues appearing as details. The most evocative is the Gokhda sit-out, inspired by traditional architectural rhythms and reimagined as a private perch for slow mornings and long evenings. It changes how you inhabit a room. Instead of sleep-and-leave, you pause, sip masala chai, and watch the lake surface shift with the wind, or let the mountains hold your gaze for a moment of quiet.

Inside, comfort is comprehensive: plush king-sized bedding, high-speed Wi-Fi, flat-screen HDTVs, and capsule



King Room

coffee machines that turn early starts into a small ritual. Marble-clad bathrooms bring spa-like calm with rain showers and deep soaking tubs, a welcome indulgence after market walks or wedding days that run on emotion and adrenaline. Select suites lift the experience further with private whirlpool bathtubs, expansive living areas, and interconnecting options suited to bridal parties, multi-generational stays, and longer visits where everyone wants togetherness without crowding.

A forthcoming Palace Wing is set to introduce 60 additional rooms, adding breadth for peak seasons when Udaipur's wedding calendar and holiday travel converge. It signals intent that Wyndham Grand Udaipur Fatehsagar Lake is positioning itself for the long run.

"Our goal with Wyndham Grand Udaipur Fatehsagar Lake was to create a space deeply connected to the spirit of Udaipur—a place where mornings unfold beside the lake, afternoons are spent exploring palaces and markets, and evenings carry the warmth of true Rajasthani hospitality. From our sweeping amphitheatre to palace-inspired guestrooms and quiet corners designed for reflection, every detail was built to offer travellers a sense of discovery and escape," said Chirag Maroo, Owner, Wyndham Grand Udaipur.

The "quiet corners" matter. In a destination as stimulating as Udaipur, with every lane tempting you with colour and craft, a base that builds calm into its design becomes a genuine advantage. It lets the trip feel beautiful while it is



Spa

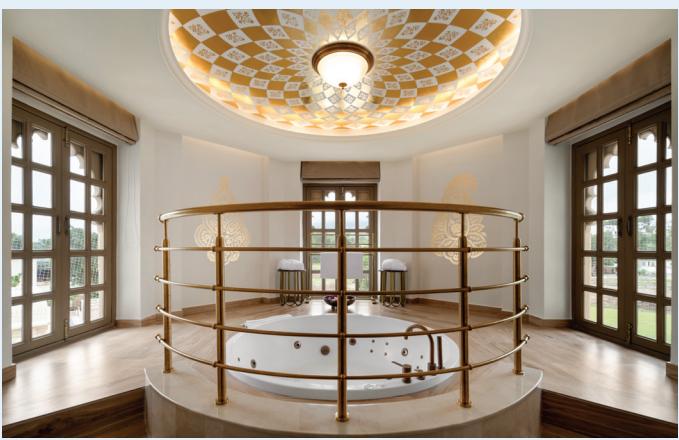


Exterior

happening, not only in hindsight, and it keeps the resort relevant beyond weddings by giving leisure travellers the restful rhythm they increasingly seek.

FOOD, WELLNESS, AND MILESTONE-READY SPACES

A signature at Wyndham Grand Udaipur Fatehsagar Lake is culinary: a dedicated pure vegetarian identity positioned as an advantage. In a wedding destination where menus can define the mood, this approach is both distinctive and practical. Rajasthan's food tradition is deeply skilled at building richness through spices, slow cooking, and



Suite



Fitness Center

thoughtful textures; it is well suited to a vegetarian celebration that still feels lavish. Across venues including Pyaala, Shakahari, and O Sian, the emphasis is on variety, comfort, and the kind of flavour that satisfies a large table without becoming heavy.

Downtime is treated as a serious part of the itinerary. There is a heated outdoor pool for long, unhurried afternoons, the Zivaya Spa for reset and recovery, and a gym for travellers who like their routine to follow them. Sports courts and open-air games keep the mood light between functions, while concierge support, childcare services, butler assistance, and details such as bridal studios and on-site EV charging help the stay feel effortless. The resort's pet-friendly approach adds another layer of ease for guests who consider travel incomplete without a four-legged companion.

Then come the celebrations, the reason Udaipur remains one of India's great wedding stages. Wyndham Grand Udaipur Fatehsagar Lake offers 10,000 square metres of venue-rich space, designed for everything from intimate rituals to large-format receptions and corporate gatherings. The headline feature is Udaipur's largest amphitheatre, seating 300 guests, built for sangeet performances and celebratory evenings. A grand ballroom anchors indoor events, while expansive lawns and open-air settings allow celebrations to unfold with the lake and hills as natural décor.

Among the standout spaces are the Royal Vedi and Vintage Lawn, built with wedding rituals in mind; Crimson Terrace for high-energy evenings with a view; and the Ball Room and Imperial Hall for conferences, gala dinners, and weather-proof celebration planning. Different moods, different capacities, and the ability to craft a wedding narrative that flows naturally from daylight rituals to evening spectacle.

Indian weddings are not one event; they are a sequence of moments, each with its own tempo and emotion. When a property can move guests smoothly between ritual,

celebration, and pause, the entire experience becomes more joyful. Here, scale and scenery are paired with the operational discipline that large gatherings demand: adaptable layouts, clear movement, and the steady sense that details will be handled.

THE NEW ADDRESS FOR BIG MOMENTS

Wyndham Grand Udaipur Fatehsagar Lake arrives as a flagship address built for the way people celebrate and travel now: with bigger guest lists, more multi-generational trips, and a stronger appetite for places that feel both cinematic and comfortable. Its lakeside setting, palace-inspired design details, pure vegetarian dining identity, leisure-and-wellbeing rhythm, and serious venue portfolio combine into a resort that can host spectacular weddings while still delivering quieter pleasures: a slow morning on a Gokhda sit-out, an unhurried afternoon by the pool, a spa reset after a market run, and a sunset that makes conversation linger.

"For us, luxury is defined by thoughtful details, intuitive service, and an experience where every guest feels genuinely valued and celebrated. At Wyndham Grand Udaipur, our endeavor is to seamlessly blend regal elegance with contemporary sensibilities, creating stays that evolve into cherished memories. Set against our breathtaking, palace-inspired backdrop, we are proud to position the hotel as a distinguished wedding destination for discerning domestic



Exterior

and international guests seeking truly grand celebrations in the heart of Udaipur," said Vishal Kapoor, Vice President – Operations, Wyndham Grand Udaipur.

In a city where romance has always been part of the architecture, the resort offers a fresh stage, not to replace Udaipur's story, but to let guests live it more luxuriously, and with the lake as their constant companion.

The newly opened Wyndham Grand Udaipur Fatehsagar Lake unveils a luxurious, romantic lakeside address, crafted for landmark celebrations, indulgent getaways, and unhurried Udaipur mornings framed by tranquil waters and timeless elegance.



Shakahari Restaurant



ROMANCE IN EVERYTHING



THE ART OF THE MINI MOON



Couple in Historical Attire. Image Courtesy: Lokman Salan, Pexels

Short escapes, deep connection, and cities that understand romance

JEET BHATTACHARYA

Romance, like travel, has changed with time. Long honeymoons are no longer the automatic marker of commitment for couples whose lives are shaped by work schedules, shared responsibilities, and limited leaves. Many now choose to step away briefly, carving out a short window that feels intentional and personal. This is where the mini moon finds its place.

A mini moon is built around the focus. Two days away allow couples to slow down without stepping completely away from everyday life. The aim is presence, not distance. Cities suit this rhythm well. They are designed for walking, conversation, and discovery at an unhurried pace. Even within a tight schedule, cities offer quiet corners, memorable meals, and moments that unfold naturally between landmarks and neighbourhood streets.

Two days in the right city can feel deeply absorbing. Mornings stretch over coffee and conversation, afternoons drift through streets filled with texture and memory, evenings invite long dinners and unplanned walks. Cities encourage this kind of closeness. They reward curiosity, invite shared discoveries, and leave room for quiet moments between landmarks, neighbourhoods, and views that reveal themselves slowly.

HOW TO DO A MINI MOON RIGHT (WITHOUT RUSHING IT)

A mini moon works best when it follows a simple rhythm. The idea is not to pack in sights, but to let the short break unfold with ease and intention. Think of it as two nights that carry a clear emotional arc. The first evening is about arrival and settling in, the second day allows space for discovery and indulgence, and the final morning brings a gentle close.

Every mini moon needs one experience that defines the city, a moment that anchors the trip and stays with you long after you return. Balance this with one slow ritual, a shared walk, a bathhouse visit, a garden pause, or an unhurried drink, where time feels secondary. Add one indulgent meal that invites conversation, and allow the rest of the trip to grow around these touchpoints. The goal is a memory that feels complete, not compressed.

VENICE — ROMANCE ON WATER

Venice suits the mini moon instinctively. Movement slows the moment you arrive, guided by water and narrow lanes where footsteps replace traffic noise. The city encourages attention. Light shifts across canals, doors open onto quiet courtyards, and evenings stretch naturally along the water's edge.

Where to stay matters here. Dorsoduro offers quiet streets and gallery-lined walks. Cannaregio feels lived-in, with local bars and late dinners. San Marco brings proximity to landmarks and early-morning magic when the squares are still empty.

The 48-hour flow begins with an evening wander, cicchetti at a standing bar, dinner near a canal where conversation sets the pace. The following morning rewards early starts. St Mark's Square at dawn feels private, Rialto markets add colour and rhythm, and backstreets lead to unexpected churches and bridges. As daylight softens, a gondola ride or vaporetto journey delivers the city's defining moment.

The final morning belongs to coffee by the water and an unhurried departure. Venice leaves couples with a shared calm that lingers well beyond the journey.

LISBON - HILLS, LIGHT, AND LONG EVENINGS

Lisbon has a natural ease that appeals strongly to couples. Coastal light washes over tiled façades, viewpoints open suddenly across the city, and days drift comfortably into late nights. Luxury hotels sit comfortably beside the pastel streets of the Old City, creating a setting where history and contemporary life share the same rhythm.

Alfama sets the tone for a romantic stay. Its narrow lanes wind past small squares, family-run restaurants, and intimate Fado houses that fill after dark. Fado remains central to Lisbon's emotional life, shaped by expressive vocals and acoustic guitars that carry stories of longing and belonging. An evening here unfolds slowly, starting with local dishes, regional wines, and music that invites quiet attention rather than spectacle.

A mini moon in Lisbon balances gentle structure with freedom. Mornings suit unhurried café stops and hilltop viewpoints. Afternoons reward wandering through Chiado or along the river.

As evening arrives, the city shifts energy, with Bairro Alto offering lively streets and music that runs late. Lisbon leaves couples feeling connected, relaxed, and fully present within a short span of shared time.

ISTANBUL - WHERE CULTURES MEET, EVENINGS

LINGER

Istanbul carries romance through contrast and continuity. Minarets rise beside modern cafés, ferry horns echo across the Bosphorus, and daily life unfolds across two continents. The city rewards couples who enjoy shared discovery, where history, food, and ritual shape each hour with quiet confidence.

Staying near Sultanahmet places iconic landmarks within walking distance, lending early mornings a calm rarely felt later in the day. Karaköy offers a contemporary pace with art spaces, bakeries, and waterfront walks.



Lisbon's Alfama District and Tagus River. Image Courtesy: Hub JACQU, Pexels

Bosphorus-facing neighbourhoods provide a softer setting, where views guide conversation and time stretches naturally.

Evenings define Istanbul's appeal. Rooftop dinners overlook domes and water, setting the tone for long meals and slow exchanges. Days move through Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque, and the Grand Bazaar, where colour and craft invite lingering attention.

A Bosphorus cruise as daylight fades becomes the defining moment, framed by skyline silhouettes and passing neighbourhoods.

Mornings begin with a traditional Turkish breakfast, generous and unhurried, followed by a hammam visit that settles the pace before departure. Istanbul leaves couples with a sense of depth, shaped through shared moments that feel ceremonial and grounded.



Couple in Venice. Image Courtesy: karsten winegeart, unsplash



Udaipur Stadtpalast. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

PRAGUE - A CITY MEANT FOR TWO

Prague carries romance with ease. The city moves at a human pace, shaped by spired skylines, riverside paths, and streets that invite lingering walks. Old Town squares glow softly after dusk, cafés spill warm light onto cobblestones, and the Vltava reflects the city's quieter moods.

Couples find pleasure in simple rituals here. A slow stroll along the river, hands brushing as swans drift nearby. A mug of hot wine shared while wandering through medieval lanes. An evening spent listening to live jazz in a

low-lit club, where conversation settles naturally between sets. Prague feels instinctively shared, asking little beyond presence and time.

Days unfold through castle views, shaded parks, and bridges that reward repeated crossings. Evenings draw couples inward, toward intimate tables and music-filled rooms. Within forty-eight hours, Prague offers a complete arc of connection, grounded in shared movement, unhurried moments, and a city that seems built for companionship.

UDAIPUR - WATER, LIGHT, AND A SLOWER RHYTHM

Udaipur offers a calm that suits a short romantic escape. The city unfolds around water, where palaces reflect softly across Lake Pichola and mornings arrive without urgency. Life here moves at a measured pace, shaped by temple bells, lake views, and evenings that invite quiet conversation.

Staying near the lake places most experiences within easy reach. Days begin with walks through the City Palace complex, followed by time in the old streets where craft shops and cafés encourage pauses. A boat ride across the lake becomes the defining moment, carrying couples past islands and historic façades as the light begins to fade.

Evenings in Udaipur centre on simple pleasures. A candlelit dinner by the water, music carried lightly through courtyards, the lake settling into stillness after sunset. The final morning suits temple visits, a slow breakfast, and one last look across the water.



Caminito, La Boca, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

Within forty-eight hours, Udaipur creates a sense of retreat and closeness, shaped by shared stillness and a city that understands the value of lingering.

BUENOS AIRES - LATE NIGHTS, SHARED RHYTHM

Buenos Aires expresses romance through time spent together. The city invites couples into long dinners, unhurried conversations, and nights that stretch comfortably past midnight. European architecture frames broad avenues, neighbourhood cafés set the daily rhythm, and music carries through streets after dark.

San Telmo feels grounded and atmospheric, with cobbled lanes, antique shops, and intimate bars. Recoleta brings classic elegance and tree-lined walks, while Palermo offers creative energy through restaurants, wine bars, and late-night venues. Days suit wandering without a fixed plan, stopping for coffee, browsing bookshops, and settling into parks where locals linger.

Evenings define the city's emotional register. A traditional parrilla meal unfolds slowly, followed by a tango performance where movement and music speak with quiet intensity. These moments shape a shared rhythm that feels personal and immersive.

By the final morning, brunch becomes an event in itself, closing the mini moon on a note of ease. Buenos Aires leaves couples with a sense of closeness formed through shared hours, music, and a city that values connection above speed.

SIX CITIES, ONE SHARED PAUSE

Mini moons succeed because they respect time. They accept limits and work within them, shaping travel around presence, attention, and shared rhythm. Across these six cities, romance takes different forms. Venice offers stillness shaped by water. Lisbon leans into light, music, and late evenings. Istanbul



Aerial View of Obelisco de Buenos Aires. Image Courtesy: Gabriel Ramos, Pexels

layers ritual and history into daily life. Prague invites closeness through walks and quiet corners. Udaipur slows everything down through water and reflection. Buenos Aires stretches nights and conversations with ease.

Each city proves that forty-eight hours can hold depth when travel is guided by intention. These journeys show that romance lives in how time is spent together, not in how far one travels or how long one stays. The mini moon becomes a ritual couples return with, carrying its calm and connection back into everyday life.



Venice, Italy. Image Courtesy: Henrique Ferreira, Unsplash



TOURISM LEADERS GATHER IN TEL AVIV AS ISRAEL PRESENTS RECOVERY EFFORTS AT IMTM 2026

IMTM 2026 highlights Israel's tourism recovery vision

ARJUN GILL

Minister of Tourism Haim Katz, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee, and Director-General of the Ministry of Tourism Michael Izhakov cut the ribbon at the opening of the Israel Ministry of Tourism's pavilion at the International Mediterranean Tourism Market (IMTM) tourism fair in Tel Aviv recently. IMTM was held from 3-4 February 2026 at the Expo Tel Aviv, Israel.

At the IMTM 2026 International Tourism Exhibition at the Tel Aviv Convention Centre (Ganei HaTa'arucha), Minister of Tourism Haim Katz opened the IMTM fair with his speech, stating, "I am pleased to open the IMTM fair for the fourth time since taking office. With us here today are tourism professionals and representatives of the tourism industry – the beating heart of Israeli tourism – international guests, ministers, and diplomats."

He then added, "Your presence here, whether through a pavilion, a delegation, or the participation of a Minister of Tourism, is a sign of confidence in Israeli tourism and in a shared path forward. The past few years have been challenging, marked by a dramatic decline in the number of tourists."

The Minister went on to say, "The Ministry of Tourism, under my leadership, has worked to provide the industry with the widest range of tools for preservation and rapid recovery. Among other measures, this included dedicated budgets for the rehabilitation of hotels that hosted evacuees, the preservation of the essential workforce among inbound tour operators, and the encouragement of domestic tourism and guided tours with licensed tour guides, as part of the 'Israeli Tourism Month' initiative."

He continued, "Uncertainty and travel warnings have impacted tourism activity. However, with improvements in flight availability expected in 2026, there is reason for optimism that the first signs of recovery are already here. Demand for Israel among supportive audiences and key countries, led by the United States, has remained strong. We see this clearly on the ground, with an increase in tourist arrivals compared to previous years."





He further added, "Accordingly, we are increasing our investment in marketing, and soon we will launch a new flagship campaign in the United States titled 'I AM ISRAEL.' The campaign will address, separately and in tailored messaging, audiences with a strong connection to Israel – with a focus on Israel supporters, Evangelicals, and Jewish communities – alongside continued advertising and hosting activities in other leading markets."

He stated further, "I have set a target of seven million tourists by 2030, and we are working to turn this goal into reality through plans to increase hotel room supply, develop infrastructure to enhance the visitor experience, strengthen the workforce in the hospitality sector, and more. At the same time, we will continue to strengthen domestic tourism, and this coming May, we will hold the



"Israeli Tourism Month" for the second time – to support local businesses and make tourism more accessible to the Israeli public. Our goal is not only to return to where we were, but to improve and break new records."

He then concluded by saying, "I wish everyone a successful and fruitful exhibition"

During the fair, the Minister and the Director-General had meetings with their counterparts from around the world, as well as with international partners. Dozens of journalists from key source countries for tourism to Israel have also participated in the fair as guests of the Ministry of Tourism.

IMTM serves as an important international platform for the Ministry of Tourism to showcase its activities and as an opportunity to forge new connections and partnerships.



LA LAUNCHES DIGITAL HUB FOR INDIA

The new Los Angeles Trade Hub streamlines training, itineraries and updates for India's expanding travel trade sector

TT BUREAU

Los Angeles Tourism has introduced a dedicated digital Trade Hub for the Indian travel trade, strengthening its engagement with one of its fastest-growing outbound markets. The platform serves as a single window for travel advisors, tour operators and MICE planners, offering practical tools that simplify showcasing and selling the destination.

Designed for India's evolving travel community, the hub provides updated assets that keep partners informed, confident and connected with Los Angeles' latest offerings.

TOOLS FOR TRADE

The Trade Hub features ready-to-sell itineraries, digital brochures, destination videos, training modules and educational webinars. Advisors can access FAM trip details and use the LA Perks Pass, which highlights trade-exclusive benefits.

WhatsApp for Business ensures quick access to real-time updates and on-ground assistance, supporting partners and enabling faster engagement.

Seema Kadam, Regional Director for India, said the country remains a key market for Los Angeles. She added that the hub reflects the organisation's commitment to empowering the Indian trade with user-friendly resources that enhance destination knowledge and improve conversions.



Seema Kadam, Regional Director, India
Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board

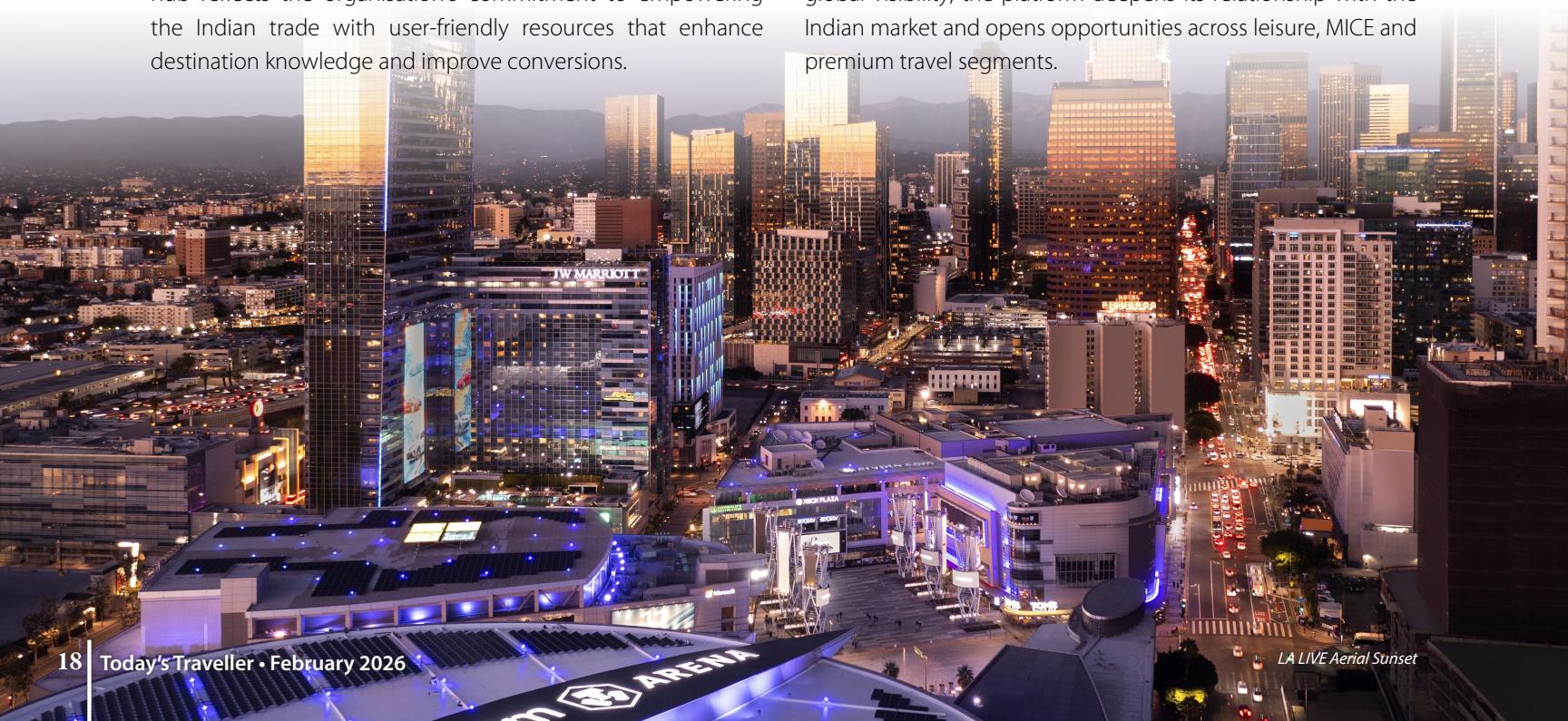
CITY ON THE RISE

Los Angeles is entering a defining moment as it prepares to host major global events, including the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The city continues to evolve with new cultural attractions, immersive experiences, waterfront developments, and a sweeping modernization of LAX. The fully electric SkyLink, debuting in 2026, will offer fast, seamless connections across terminals, parking, rental cars, and the Metro rail network, supported by the new LAX/Metro Transit Center. Anticipated openings such as Fast & Furious: Hollywood Drift at Universal Studios Hollywood, the West Harbor

district, the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, and DataLand highlight LA's transformation. With world-class infrastructure and landmark events ahead, Los Angeles is truly a city on the rise.

STRONGER INDIA CONNECT

For India's travel professionals, the new Trade Hub offers resources that combine updated content, incentives and seamless communication. As Los Angeles enters a new era of global visibility, the platform deepens its relationship with the Indian market and opens opportunities across leisure, MICE and premium travel segments.





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Leadership

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LOVE IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

Why the most enduring romance in your life might be with four wheels and an engine

CHANDRUTPAL DAS BORO

Each February, we honour romantic love with flowers, chocolates, and dinners by candlelight. We raise a glass to soulmates and first kisses, to the connections that shape our existence. Yet, another love story is quietly developing in driveways and garages around the globe. One that is equally passionate, equally enduring, and possibly equally irrational.

It's the romance between individuals and their vehicles.

More than seventy per cent of us truly, profoundly develop an affection for our cars. We call them. We converse with them. We excuse their unpredictable traits just as we would a sulky companion. Someone softly encourages their Honda on chilly mornings. Another marks the anniversary of their Volvo together with their children's birthdays.

Before rejecting this as mere sentiment, take a moment to consider the evidence. University of Chicago behavioural scientist Nicholas Epley found that when we give names to our cars and assign them personalities, we are employing the same emotional framework we utilise in human relationships. A survey of almost nine hundred listeners of NPR's "Car Talk" revealed that the individuals who had the strongest affection for their cars were those who had genuinely anthropomorphised them, attributing thoughts, beliefs, and unique personalities to their vehicles.

THE ANATOMY OF AUTOMOTIVE ROMANCE

Like any great love story, the relationship between an individual and their vehicle develops across emotional layers, each satisfying profound human desires.

There's achievement. That instant when you finally purchase your dream vehicle after years of saving is evidence that you've succeeded, that you are significant. Next is identity and self-expression, with your car revealing who you are even before you speak.

Most importantly, there's freedom, that feeling from your initial experience behind the wheel that never fades away, the recollection of being unbound and set free. And ultimately, memory, the sound of your engine, the worn steering wheel, that fragrance that reminds of home.

THE CAR AS MATCHMAKER

Sixty-five percent of long-term relationships began with a car date. Not a candlelight dinner. Not a movie. A car outing, two individuals, limited space, the sound of an engine, and the endless highway.

Psychologist Christopher Barnes has researched why automobiles generate such a strong romantic attraction. The confined space forces proximity, breaking down barriers. The sensory experience constructs a collective reality found



nowhere else. Moreover, the vehicle provides something that is becoming increasingly uncommon, a true, seamless connection.

Fifty-seven percent of Americans experienced a notable "first" in a vehicle: first kiss, first "I love you," first heartbreak. Seventy-eight percent have engaged in serious relationship conversations while driving—choosing to cohabit, become engaged, or completely end the relationship.

There's an aspect of driving that simplifies expressing difficult matters, disclosing vulnerabilities, and taking emotional risks. You aren't required to establish eye contact. You can gaze at the path in front of you while revealing your innermost feelings.

Study participants recall their first vehicles as freedom incarnate. Cruising through the streets with friends, exchanging secrets and aspirations, the car serving as a moving sanctuary where anything seemed achievable.

The romance flows in both directions. Studies indicate that men purchase eye-catching sports cars in hopes of drawing in potential partners, and at first, this proves effective. However, when women assess the potential for long-term relationships, the sports car turns into a detriment, indicating a fear of commitment instead of stability.

DIFFERENT LANGUAGES OF LOVE

Not everyone has the same affection for their cars. Seventy-three percent of women say they have emotional bonds with their cars, though the type of affection varies. Men frequently become carried away with specifications, horsepower, performance figures, and sheer power. The car symbolises the ultimate object of affection.

Women often focus on the car's feel, the sensory experience, and how the space affects their emotions. In feminist automotive studies, women characterise their cars as personal sanctuaries, intimate spaces where they can relax and express their true selves.

THE THRILL OF PASSION

The acceleration, the surge of power, the perfect shift, these trigger dopamine and adrenaline, generating neurochemical reactions that compete with any romantic thrill. A study by Ford revealed that operators of high-performance cars felt genuine happiness, a level of joy comparable to falling in love.

Customisation increases the intimacy. Research indicates that individuals who personalise their vehicles feel a deeper emotional connection. Each becomes something more, fresh wheels, personalised paint, the ideal sound system.

For fans of restoration, the passion runs the deepest. When an engine sputters back to life after months of quiet, when the hands are dirty from hours of effort, it's worth the hours put in.



Image Courtesy: Mathias Reding, Pexels

THE HEARTBREAK OF LETTING GO

Thirteen percent of car owners in the UK prefer to fix an old vehicle instead of replacing it, even if the repairs are more expensive than purchasing a new one. More than the cost, it's about devotion, about recollections held in faded dashboards, creaking doors and threadbare seats.

On Reddit threads, owners share their challenges. Inherited cars turn into treasured family heirlooms that are hard to let go of. Cars sit idle in garages, unfeasible and costly, maintained out of emotional attachment.



Image Courtesy: Autocar India



Image Courtesy: Cottonbro, Pexels



Image Courtesy: Vlada Karpovich, Pexels

"If I sell, will I regret it?" they ask. "Am I erasing memories by letting go?" These are queries identical to those posed at the conclusion of any significant relationship.

In India, the emotional weight of parting with vehicles carries particular intensity. When the Maruti 800, the car that launched millions of middle-class dreams, ceased production in 2014, the response was mourning.

Fathers who sold their first 800s reported genuine sadness because the car was a vessel containing memories of family vacations, first drives of children, and the promise of independence.

Even as newer cars arrive, families often retain elderly Ambassadors and Maruti 800s, maintaining them out of pure devotion to the memories they represent.



Image Courtesy: KoolShooters, Pexels

ENDURING BONDS

Even with all the changes today, electric cars, ridesharing platforms, self-driving technology, the core attraction remains. Younger generations view ownership in a different light, yet for those who do possess, the emotional connection is still significant.

The car's significance in human romance remains strong. Even with dating apps and evolving dating behaviours, that intimate, focused environment is unparalleled for authentic connection.

Nearly half of car purchasers today opt for used cars not only for their cost-effectiveness but also for their "unique histories" or understanding that older vehicles carry stories eager to be continued.

This Valentine's season, amidst the chocolates and flowers dominating the cultural dialogue, think about the subtle romance unfolding in driveways globally.

The affectionate pat on the dashboard. The thorough cleaning on Saturday afternoon. The refusal to upgrade when logic indicates otherwise.

Individuals continue to whisper support to moody engines. Families continue to celebrate their vehicles' achievements alongside their personal milestones.

One may think they are being irrational. Instead, they are being deeply human, showing that love doesn't need a pulse, just a heart ready to offer it.

The greatest romance isn't always the one that is the most logical. It's the one that makes you feel most alive, most free, most yourself.

And at times, that romance features four wheels, a motor, and a clear highway stretching out.

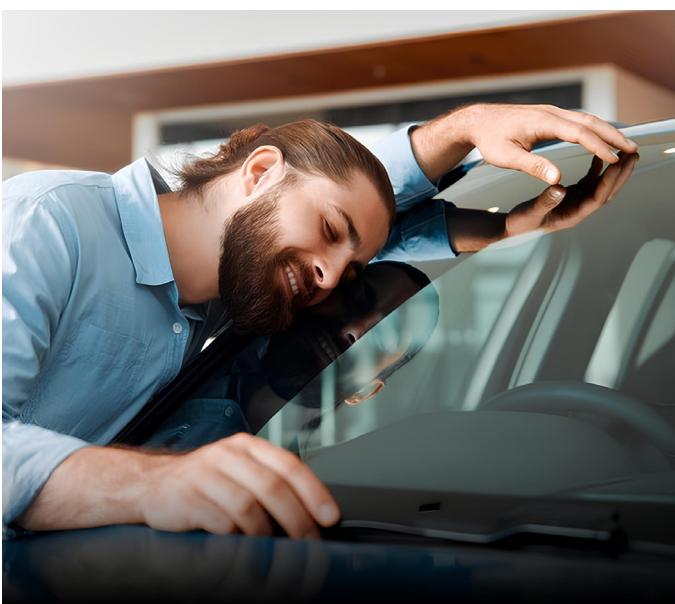


Image Courtesy: Carzone

HOMAGE TO EPIC WARRIORS MINUTE REPEATER

- Alexander the Great



The 18K 2N yellow gold dial is engraved by hand, its taille-douce lines recalling the spears of Alexander's army.

A softly blurred enamel scene brings Alexander and Bucephalus to life on the battlefield.

The 18K white gold case and buckle carry the distinctive Macedonian pattern of spear notches

TOKENS OF LOVE, COURTSHIP AND DEVOTION

Tokens of love that were crafted when words were risky, etiquette was strict, or distance was cruel

TT BUREAU



An Illustration From The Dilsuzname For Handkerchiefs in 15 Century. Image Courtesy: Esra KRMN, Pinterest

There is a particular kind of romance that does not speak loudly. It sits in a palm, hides under a glove, hangs on a ribbon at the throat, or waits in a workbox. Across centuries, lovers have trusted small handmade things that could carry meaning without inviting scrutiny.

These were not merely pretty objects. They were strategies and proof of time spent, of patience, of skill, of the willingness to carry another person in daily life rather than only in grand declarations. In an age of instant messages, that idea has quietly returned almost as a luxury: love measured in effort.

WELSH LOVESPOONS

Welsh lovespoons are one in the endless list of items that straddle the line between courting and craftsmanship. Generally traced back to the 17th century, these beautiful creations were usually made from a single piece of wood. With motifs like chains and

cages, symbolising the longing to be trapped in passion and love and motifs like keys and keyholes representing the key to one's heart. Over time, icons have changed meanings and new motifs and symbols have been incorporated into this living art form. The art form transforms the spoon, a commonplace household item, into a decorative piece to be shown off and admired.

THREAD, LINEN, AND SECRET MESSAGES

Across Europe, handkerchiefs slipped past domestic scrutiny, smuggling stitched hearts and short sentiments. Being household items, these tokens of affection passed through without catching eyes and raising eyebrows.

One of the most distinct traditions of these handkerchiefs survives in northern Portugal, especially linked to Minho: Lenços de Namorados ("sweetheart handkerchiefs"). These embroidered textiles became a recognised form of

romantic communication in a society where direct speech between young women and men could be constrained.

These adorable creations show the tiny imperfections, misspellings and awkward verses reveling the nerves, effort and hands that crafted them.

POSY RINGS

Of all the tokens here, the Posy rings were the most public of them all, adorning the lovers' hands even in public spaces. Arising from early modern Britain, these rings carried inscriptions in the inner band, keeping the sentiments private. Most of them were made of gold, the metal that symbolised permanence and resisted tarnish, symbolising a promise meant to stand the test of time.

Outwardly, many of them look plain and proper, hiding away the improprieties from the peering eyes. This tradition still finds echoes in the modern day as inscriptions of names and initials inside wedding rings.

MONEY TURNED INTO MEMORY

There is something radical about converting currency into sentiment. Turning an economic token designed to be interchangeable, a love token, making it unique and specific. Britain has a long tradition of "love tokens" made by smoothing or defacing coins, engraving initials or names, and sometimes piercing them so they could be worn as pendants.

The river Thames, in particular, has yielded large numbers of such altered objects, which is part of why "crooked coins" have become strongly associated with British love-token folklore.

The darker side of this tradition is perhaps the "Leaden Hearts", which were similar tokens with sentiments etched on them made by convicts awaiting exile. Here, the tokens become leaden by the weight of grief it carries.

LOVER'S-EYE MINIATURES

Few objects capture the tension between desire and discretion like the lover's eye miniature. These small portraits, typically showing only an eye, became fashionable in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Often set into lockets, brooches, and rings, these miniatures turned intimacy into a riddle. Some of them even include tears, or the suggestion of a shared secret. This tradition perhaps survives to this day through cropped photographs, private playlists and voice notes that become talismans for love. Its meaning apparent only to the lovers themselves.

VINAIGRETTES AND SCENTED SACHETS

Some cultures used scent, the most memory-stubborn sense of all, as the carriers of their affection.



Welsh Love Spoons. Image Courtesy: Lagomviet, Etsy

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, vinaigrettes were small decorative boxes designed to hold aromatics beneath a pierced grille. Vinaigrettes were worn on a chatelaine, carried in a pocket, or hung around the neck. They were tied to "smelling salts" culture and the management of odour, but their form also lent itself to gifting: intimate, elegant, handled close to the body.

Scented sachets play a parallel role in Chinese folk customs. Worn close to the body, they are seen as symbols of affection and care. They are especially visible around the Dragon Boat Festival, when people display and wear



Carved Wooden Khakis or Pedias (Combs). Image Courtesy: gaatha.handicrafts, Instagram



A Traditional Posy Ring. Image Courtesy: AURONIA Wedding Rings

them, often filled with aromatic herbs and decorated with embroidery and tassels, and are believed to ward off evil and illness.

In several regions, the same object also slips into romance: couples may exchange sachets as tokens of affection, turning fragrance into a private signature that lingers on clothing and skin long after the meeting ends.

SWEETHEART JEWELLERY AND TRENCH ART

When separation becomes dangerous, love turns practical again. Wartime produced an entire universe of portable tokens, and in Britain, one of the most recognisable forms is sweetheart jewellery: miniature replicas of military badges worn by women to signal connection and support.

Trench art expands the category further. "Trench art" is a modern umbrella term for items made during or soon after the First World War, often repurposing bullets, shell cases, driving bands, wood, bone, or embroideries. It also cautions that few pieces were literally made in trenches; while many were produced in workshops behind the lines,



A Victorian Silver Vinaigrette. Image Courtesy: Heritage Auctions

by civilians, or later by commercial trades.

This is love under pressure, one that yearns to be carried, to be touched, to outlast fear.

COMBS

The comb is a recurring token of love and marriage across cultures. In parts of India and abroad, it appears both in courtship and in rituals that mark commitment. The logic is simple: a comb belongs to the body, to the private space of home where affection actually lives, and it returns to the hand in small, everyday moments.

In the Bastar region, there are courtship practices in which unmarried boys gift handmade wooden combs to girls they admire, turning patient craft into a wearable signal. Similar practices exist in China, where comb is used as a gift with a clear promise: bai tou xie lao—staying together until hair turns white. In that telling, giving a comb to a loved one is not decorative; it is a statement of duration, a vow translated into an object meant to be used again and again.

LOVE TOKENS TODAY

Across eras, the pattern is remarkably consistent. People craft for love, they write, they create. Under the gusts of any powerful emotion, the human heart has craved to put it out into the world, to give it form, to give it words and verse and to make another experience the echoes of their own private storms.

These tokens have only grown more resonant over the years. They remind us that affection has always needed a vessel, something small enough to carry and solid enough to keep.



Lover's Eye. Image Courtesy: Etsy, Pinterest

CARTIER

The panther, the symbolic animal of Cartier, made its first appearance in the Maison's collections in 1914. Louis Cartier was the first to tame the mythic animal.



ULTRA-LUXURY VALENTINE'S GIFTS THAT REFUSE TO BE SUBTLE

Some Valentine's gifts are sweet. Others arrive with serial numbers, date stamps, and the kind of resale chatter that makes accountants lean in.

TT BUREAU

In 2026, the most luxurious Valentine's gifts are no longer about singular grand gestures. It is about building a private world for two, and the memories that linger and get carried around; equal parts romance and rarity. These are gifts for couples who like their sentiments signed, sealed, and occasionally set with diamonds.

CARTIER LOVE DIAMOND-PAVÉ BRACELET- ₹ 42,20,000

The Cartier LOVE bracelet works as a Valentine's gift because it is instantly understood. The design is a shorthand for commitment: clean, oval, and anchored by the screw motif, something chosen, secured, and maintained. In its most elevated form, the fully diamond-pavé LOVE bracelet keeps that iconic shape intact, then turns up the light with a surface that catches attention in the subtlest way.

For buyers in India, Cartier's own listings place the fully pavé model at INR 4,220,000, positioning it as the most expensive expression of the LOVE idea in this bracket.

PLATINUM ROLEX DAY-DATE 40 - ₹63,79,000

Rolex Day-Date 40 in platinum is a grand Valentine's gift that whispers its presence. Unlike other precious metals, platinum, for all its value, is subdued in what it projects outward.

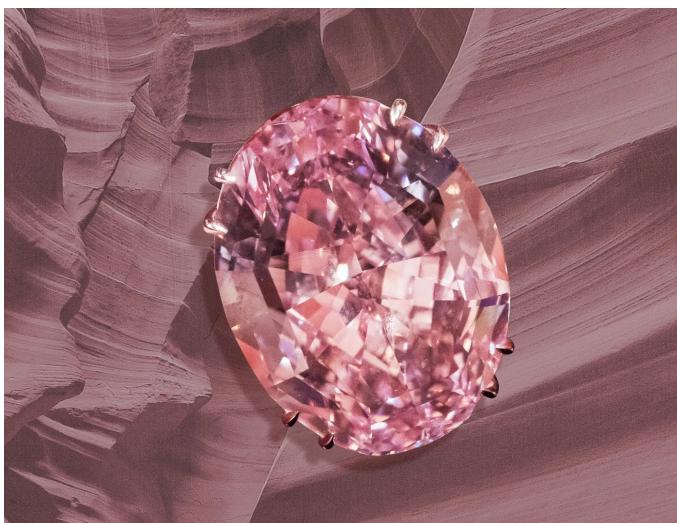
Often finished with Rolex's ice-blue dial, a subtle house code reserved for this metal, gives the watch an insider glow rather than a loud shine, adding to the subdued presence of this watch and what it means as a gift.

Inside, the calibre 3255 delivers modern performance with a 70-hour power reserve and Rolex's Superlative Chronometer standards, so the romance comes with real-world reliability.

This hefty watch becomes a part of romance with the weight of the promise of love, with a metal that symbolises permanence. More than a temporary piece, this watch can also be an heirloom passed down decades later to adorn another wrist.



Platinum Rolex Day-Date 40. Image Courtesy: Rolex



The CTF Pink Star. Image Courtesy: Sotheby's

SHUMUKH PERFUME - ₹11,880,000

Some gifts are about the scent alone. Shumukh is about the object, the spectacle, and the idea that fragrance can be a piece of collectable luxury in its own right. Shumukh, priced at AED 4.752 million (US\$1.29 million), is the most expensive perfume in the world.

Its composition blends Turkish rose and ylang-ylang with patchouli, Indian oud, sandalwood, musk, frankincense, and amber, building a scent that leans into richness and ritual. The bottle is a tall crystal flacon studded with diamonds, designed less like packaging and more like a monument. It also functions as a showcase of Dubai's heritage, with gold and silver motifs referencing pearl diving, falconry, horses, roses, the diwan, and the globe.

The piece is, quite literally, singular. It is not a purchase you can make; only one bottle exists, and it is already claimed by its own rarity.

CTF PINK STAR - ₹6,000,000,000

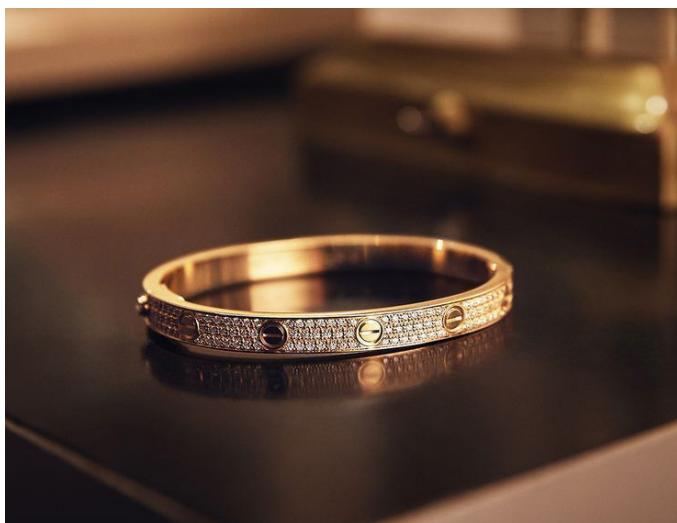
If Valentine's Day gifting had a world-record category, the CTF Pink Star would take the spotlight. This 59.60-carat oval mixed-cut diamond is graded Fancy Vivid Pink and Internally Flawless. What could be a better Valentine's gift than the ring adorned with one of the finest pink diamonds in the world?

Mined in 1999 as a 132.5-carat rough, this magnificence was the result of two years of cutting and polishing. In the most recent auction, it sold for HK\$553 million (US\$71.2 million), purchased by Chow Tai Fook and renamed to CTF Pink Star in honour of the founder. At the time, it set the all-time auction record for any diamond or jewel, and it remains a defining moment in modern jewellery lore.

The Pink Star, much like the former, is not the kind of piece you "shop" for. It surfaces only when history allows it, then disappears back into legend the moment the hammer falls.

LOVER'S DEEP SUBMARINE - ₹22,000,000

Lover's Deep is the extreme end of romantic escapism: a private submarine suite experience, full seclusion under the sea, nightly



Cartier LOVE Diamond-Pavé Bracelet. Image Courtesy: Yedenadralindralin, Pinterest

rates quoted at six-figures (USD). This is not a typical romantic getaway; this is truly bespoke. This is truly bespoke, built around total control of privacy, pace, and atmosphere.

Dining on Lover's Deep is part of the choreography. The concept has long been described as fully staffed, with a private chef shaping each meal around the mood, served while the sea presses quietly against the hull.

The romance here is not the room alone; it is the orchestration. Complete withdrawal, sensory immersion, and a world reduced to the hush of water and the glow of marine life beyond a viewing dome. For couples whose luxury language is "no distractions," this is the apex.



The Shumukh Perfume. Image Courtesy: Shumukh



Maharajah Pavilion. Image Courtesy: The Raj Palace

MAHARAJAH PAVILION, THE RAJ PALACE - ₹1,628,000

Jaipur understands romance in architecture. Its mood is indulgent detail: courtyards, mirrored walls, heritage textures, and the feeling that history is present in the room. The Raj Palace's Maharajah Pavilion is frequently cited as one of India's standout ultra-luxury suite experiences, framed around scale, privacy, and heritage opulence.

This is not a "hotel suite" in the everyday sense. It is an atmosphere designed for slow hours and private rituals. As a Valentine's gift, it works because it offers grandeur without leaving the country, and that matters in a month when time is the rarest commodity.

Jaipur also supplies an easy romantic arc: sunrise walks

through the old city, jewellery browsing that feels cinematic, a private dinner that leans into Rajasthan's regal tradition, and a return to a suite that behaves like a private museum. The most luxurious thing you can give here is space, for long conversations, late breakfasts, and an itinerary that does not chase applause.

WATERGATE PRESIDENTIAL LEGACY PACKAGE - ₹2,30,00,000

If your Valentine belongs to the "go big, then go bigger" school, The Watergate Hotel's Presidential Legacy package is one of the most unapologetic luxury propositions out there. With a \$250,000 package complete with a full crew and a private chef, the celebration stays self-contained and effortless. It is built around four nights in the Presidential Wing paired with a private 100-foot yacht experience, designed to coincide with America's 250th anniversary celebrations.

This is not a gift for a couple that celebrates in silence and peace. This is for couples who enjoy being the hosts as much as the lovers, and who prefer their memories framed by fireworks, water, and a city that knows power.

THE VALENTINE'S TRUTH AT THIS LEVEL

The smartest Valentine's gifts share one principle: they keep meaning after the moment passes. A great Valentine's present at this level does not rely on a single evening. It builds a longer story, one your partner can wear, revisit, or retell for years.

Ultra-luxury is often less about "things" and more about the ability to choreograph time, access, and experience precisely.



Lover's Deep Submarine. Image Courtesy: Oliver's Travels



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LOVE IN THE AIR: HOT AIR BALLOONS

Moments of love suspended above noise, expectation, and everyday urgency

TT BUREAU

There is a reason myths place gods above the earth, and why watchtowers, hilltop palaces, and penthouses have always carried authority. Height changes perception. When the ground pulls away, so do distractions. What remains is scale, silence, and a view that refuses urgency.

Hot air balloons understand this instinct better than any other form of travel.

Unlike aircraft or helicopters, ballooning is unhurried. There is no engine hum, no conquest of distance. The ascent unfolds gradually, guided by air and heat, and once airborne, movement becomes like travel and sometimes drifting. For couples, this quiet suspension has begun to mean something deeper. Romance here is not about adrenaline or spectacle. It is about shared stillness, trust in wind and flame, and watching the world unfold without commentary.

This is the reason why hot air balloons have become such a natural part of contemporary romance. No rehearsal is required for proposals. There are no steps when making a promise. Valentine's Day, which used to be dominated by formulaic gestures, is becoming more and more associated with memories. High above familiar ground, a balloon basket provides just that, seclusion without loneliness, drama without cacophony.

PROPOSALS WITHOUT APPLAUSE

Long before they were used as experiences, hot air balloons were used as proposal spaces. What they eliminate makes them appealing. At altitude, no crowds are present. There's no background noise to compete with. The environment promotes making decisions quietly, carefully, and with no expectations other than honesty.

Marrakech

Balloon flights near Marrakech operate at dawn, when desert air is calm, and light is soft. The Palmeraie and plains stretching toward the Atlas Mountains appear distant and hushed, while the city remains muted below. Proposals often happen mid-flight, once the burner falls silent and the basket settles into



In The Early Morning Skies Above The Masai Mara. Image Courtesy: masaimara.com

steady drift. The absence of dramatic movement allows the moment to unfold without interruption.

Napa Valley

In Napa Valley, ballooning follows carefully regulated morning routes over vineyards and rolling hills. Proposals here are rarely impulsive. Operators often coordinate landings near vineyards, allowing the moment in the air to transition into a quiet breakfast or tasting. The appeal is romantic continuity, a shared ritual that deepens love each year. The proposal becomes part of an unhurried morning, grounded in familiarity, intimacy, and rhythm.

WHEN WEDDINGS LEAVE THE GROUND

Hot air balloon weddings emerged as symbolic acts. Vow renewals, private promises, and commitments spoken quietly above familiar land shaped their earliest meaning. Over time, symbolism became the focus. Couples realised they were not seeking witnesses or orchestration. They wanted meaning and height provided that.

In the air, marriage shifts toward privacy. The basket holds only a few people, sometimes only two. Excess has no place here, and that restraint forms the appeal.

Wadi Rum

Balloon ceremonies in Wadi Rum are typically symbolic, coordinated at dawn when winds are predictable. From above, the sandstone valleys appear vast and undisturbed. Attention settles on space and silence, with no sense of being observed. Vows spoken here feel personal and inward, often followed by a simple desert breakfast that keeps the experience intimate.

Serengeti National Park

In the Serengeti, ballooning centres on wildlife viewing at sunrise. Wedding ceremonies often take place after landing, with the flight serving as a shared prelude above migrating herds and open plains. For anniversaries and second marriages, the symbolism rests in enduring love. The landscape places the couple within a scale that feels enduring and expansive.

Luxor

Luxor's balloon flights rise over the Nile and west-bank temples shortly after sunrise. Vows are often exchanged quietly in the basket, with photographers positioned at a distance. Time defines Luxor. Temples, river bends, and fields unfold slowly beneath, creating a sense of grounding and romantic calm. Marriage here feels anchored in history, carried by presence and place.

COUNTRIES WHERE ROMANCE RISES

Cappadocia, Turkey

Cappadocia's reputation rests on consistency. Volcanic terrain shaped into valleys and fairy chimneys becomes legible from the air. Flights operate at sunrise, drifting over Göreme, Love Valley, and Uçhisar. Strict regulation and experienced pilots ensure safety, even when cancellations occur. The experience resists overstatement. Its value lies in clarity.

Masai Mara, Kenya

Ballooning over the Masai Mara begins at dawn, when wildlife movement is most visible. From above, elephants, giraffes, zebras, and predators trace patterns shaped by water and grassland. Flights conclude with a bush breakfast, extending the quiet pace of the morning. Romance here grows through environment and timing.



Glide Through The Skies Over Jaipur in a Hot Air Balloon. Image Courtesy: oberoihotels.com

Château-d'Oex, Switzerland

Set within a wide Alpine valley, Château-d'Oex supports reliable ballooning due to predictable wind systems and disciplined aviation practice. Flights reveal glaciers, forests, and mountain ridges, with seasonal shifts altering the landscape. The town's annual balloon festival reinforces its reputation for romance and wonder. Romance here feels calm, expansive, and composed.

Loire Valley, France

Following the Loire River, balloon flights drift over vineyards, forests, and châteaux such as Chambord and Chenonceau. Early light softens architecture and reveals how history and agriculture coexist. Landings often lead to simple refreshments, reflecting the region's measured pace.

Segovia, Spain

Ballooning in Segovia rises above medieval streets, Roman aqueducts, cathedral towers, and fortified walls. The pace remains unhurried, allowing architecture to set the mood. Romance here grows through proximity to history, craft, and heritage.

Teotihuacan, Mexico

Flights over Teotihuacan lift at sunrise, revealing the geometry of the Pyramid of the Sun, Pyramid of the Moon, and the Avenue of the Dead. From above, the city's original intent becomes clear. The experience feels grounding, shaped by silence and scale, offering couples a moment held carefully by time.

Jaipur, India

At dawn, when Jaipur is still suspended between night and day, hot air balloons rise quietly above the city's edges. The movement is slow enough to register detail. Fort walls stretch along ridgelines, palace courtyards reveal their geometry, and streets begin to show signs of early activity without sound or congestion. The city does not announce itself from the air; it reveals itself in layers.

Balloon flights here take advantage of Rajasthan's calm morning conditions, using the cooler air to maintain steady altitude and controlled drift. As the basket moves, Jaipur's historic core blends naturally into its surroundings. Forts, temples, neighbourhoods, and open land appear as parts of a single landscape. The experience reveals a quiet romance in how centuries-old structures still stand within a living, functioning city.

LOVE, BRIEFLY UNTETHERED

A hot air balloon flight on Valentine's Day offers something increasingly rare: distance without disconnection. As the ground recedes, expectations loosen. There are no reservations to keep, no gestures to measure, no audience to impress. What remains is sky, slow movement, and the quiet awareness of being together.

Ballooning introduces a different rhythm into romance. Conversation softens. Silence feels natural. Love exists without performance. From above, complexity simplifies. Streets, schedules, and routines shrink, leaving clarity in their place.



Hot Air Balloons in Göreme, Türkiye. Image Courtesy: Mehmet Turgut Kirkgoz, Pexels

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Between Nagaland and Manipur, Dzukou blooms with pink trumpets and old love legends

TT BUREAU

Dzukou Valley does something rare for couples, by making you start living your romance. It is a place where the outside world simply cannot keep interrupting you. The valley sits at 2,452 metres, right on the border of Nagaland and Manipur, and during the monsoon months, it earns its nickname as the "Valley of Flowers" of the eastern Himalayas. The walk is long enough to slow your thoughts. The air is cool enough to keep you close. The mist is thick enough to make everything feel personal.

The name, traced to Angami and Mao languages, is widely interpreted as meaning "cold water", and once you are there, you see why. Streams keep cutting across the valley, flowing through soft, peaty ground, dwarf bamboo patches, and stretches of rhododendron forest. The romance here is of the simple sort: two people walking, sharing water, pointing out a bloom, stopping because the view demands it.

THE DZUKOU LILY: WHY EVERYONE COMES HERE

The main character here is the endemic Dzukou Lily, often presented as *Lilium chitragadae*. It is known for pink to purple trumpet-shaped blooms, appearing late May through early September, with peak flowering usually syncing with the early monsoon period. When the valley is in bloom, it can feel like a natural superbloom, which is why people compare it with Uttarakhand's Valley of Flowers.

You may hear stories mention "500 lily species", but the more reliable point is that the valley hosts 500+ plant species in total, and lilies are only part of that wider variety. You may also see the term "Lilium Leela" in retreat-style marketing, but it is more artistic license than botany.

The lily is built for altitude. Plants are often described as 30–70 centimetres tall, with slender stems and one to three nodding blooms. The leaves have a waxy surface to handle wind and weather, and the bulbs survive cold months and return in spring.





Dzuko Valley Guest House. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

Many accounts place the lily's formal discovery around 1991, attributed to botanist Hijam Bikramjit of Manipur University, with the name chitrangadae linked to his mother, Chitrangada Devi. Some observers compare it with the Shirui Lily (*Lilium mackliniae*). However, there is one fact across multiple sources that's repeated: it rarely thrives outside Dzukou, which is why protecting the valley matters more than trying to "take" the flower elsewhere.

LOVE, LORE, FOOD, AND WHEN TO GO

A popular legend speaks of lovers from rival clans who fled to Dzukou, only to be punished: one becomes a stone pillar on the rim, the other becomes the lilies on the meadow floor, blooming every year yet forever apart, like a reminder that some things survive even when circumstances do not cooperate. Witlessly or unwittingly, it lands emotionally when you are actually standing there. A valley full of returning flowers makes the idea of returning love feel plausible.

Nearby cultural layers add depth. Ao Moatsu festival, often held around May–June, is linked with community celebrations, dances, and feasts. Kisama Heritage Village, about 12 kilometres from Kohima, hosts the Hornbill Festival (December 1–10), drawing multiple tribes and often described as attracting 100,000+ visitors.

Food becomes part of the experience too. Black rice wine is often described as fermenting over 7–10 days, producing 5–8% ABV, and is quite sought after. Axone (akhuni), the fermented soybean condiment, is made by boiling soybeans, then fermenting them above a kitchen fire in banana leaves for 3–7 days, before crushing them into a coarse paste. Some homestays around Kohima offer cooking and "fire-feast" experiences.

Timing depends on what you want: February has clearer skies and easier trekking (daytime temperatures hover between 10–20°C), but no lilies. May to July is peak bloom, especially June–July, but monsoon means mud and landslide risk. December to January is crisp but cold, with nights often reaching 0–5°C.

One more thing: the valley needs care. Fires have hit hard, including a 2006 wildfire and severe 2020–21 blazes often cited as scorching around 200 acres. Even with a 2019 plastic ban, litter still shows up around huts and trails. Pack out waste, stay on trails, and consider hiring local guides who help keep trekking responsible.



Hiker in Dzukou Valley. Image Courtesy: Inu Etc, Pexels



Dzukou Lily. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

THE TREK THAT BECOMES THE DATE

There are two primary roads into Dzukou, and both lead to the same result: you arrive fatigued, pleased, and a little closer than when you started, for effort has a subtle way of converting into intimacy.

The Viswema route is the most used. Viswema lies around 24 kilometres from Kohima, with shared Sumo taxis readily available. Most couples stock up at the village market, then take a jeep track roughly 8–9 kilometres to the trek start.

The crux is the "Vertical Highway": about 500 steep steps, gaining roughly 500 metres in 45–90 minutes, where you fall into each other's pace and trade quiet encouragement. Crest the pass and the valley opens into a wide plateau, followed by a 4–5 kilometre meadow walk that feels like the real date and the most memorable. Trek time is commonly 3.5–4 hours on foot, excluding the motorable section.

Zakhama is the alternate route, about 14 kilometres from Kohima. After a shorter motorable stretch of roughly 2–3 kilometres, the climb runs 5–6 kilometres, with slopes sometimes quoted at a 30–60 degree gradient, taking 4–5 hours. Fewer people, wilder silence, and small gestures land bigger, before you join the same plateau trail.

HUT NIGHTS, STARS, AND EACH OTHER

Nagaland requires an Inner Line Permit (ILP) that can be obtained online with passport details. Foreign nationals may require Protected Area licenses, which typically have minimum group requirements. Entry fees at checkpoints are typically low, with access points from both Nagaland and Manipur.

Most travellers arrive via Dimapur airport, then drive roughly 74 kilometres to Kohima in about two hours. Shared transport is available, while private taxis are preferred if you are in a group.

In the valley, the Trekkers' Hut is simple but surprisingly couple-friendly, more a no-frills mountain base than a typical dorm stop. There are basic partitioned rooms and thick rented blankets for those sub-10°C nights. Meals are hearty and easy: rice-dal-veg, chicken, noodles, tea. If you prefer a more romantic setup, plan cosy stays in Kohima or the villages before and after Dzukou.

This place feels made for couples. With no electricity, the evenings slow down into shared conversations, and stars that seem closer than usual. The weak network removes the outside world, leaving space only for each other, no notifications, no distractions, no rush. Even the mountain stream, boiled before use, becomes part of a shared ritual, a small act of care repeated together. Everything here nudges you closer, physically, emotionally, instinctively. The limitations of our world are the very reason it feels like a lovers' hideaway.



The breathtaking beauty of the Dzukou Valley. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

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FRANCK MULLER
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THE REAL BASTAR: MARKETS, MAKERS, AND THE MEMORY OF FORESTS



In Bastar, every material is valued, used fully, and respected deeply

TT BUREAU

Bastar does not perform for visitors. It works, sings, forges, harvests, and trades on its own terms. Arriving here feels less like "seeing" a destination and more like stepping into a living system where craft, forest knowledge, and ritual life still shape the rhythm of every week.

In this part of Chhattisgarh, travellers looking for quieter, more meaningful experiences find something rare: a region where culture is not curated, it is lived.

A LANDSCAPE BUILT ON DAILY LIFE

Bastar spreads across roughly 39,000 square kilometres in southern Chhattisgarh, brushing the borders of Odisha, Telangana, and Maharashtra.

Tribal communities form a large share of the population, and the economy still leans on agriculture, forest produce, and craft production rather than tourism.

The places visitors often hear about, Kondagaon's craft villages, Chitrakote's roaring waterfall, the limestone caves of Kanger Valley, and the weekly haats, are not "attractions" placed on a route map. They are everyday infrastructure, the way Bastar functions.

THE HAATS: MARKETS WITH A PULSE

If you want the real Bastar, follow the crowd to a weekly haat. The market is where forest produce, tools, baskets, food, and handcrafted objects move through hands and households.

It is also where news travels, music surfaces, and the social fabric becomes visible. Browsing here does not feel like shopping in the usual sense. It feels like reading a place through what it values: utility, skill, seasonality, and community.

DANDAKANYA: A FOREST THAT STORES MEMORY

The Dandakanya forest appears in the Ramayana as a place of punishment, yet standing beneath its canopy suggests something else: a vast archive of ecological intelligence.

Even after the monsoon, the landscape stays green. Waterfalls keep their force through the year. The air carries sal resin, ripening fruit, damp earth, and a kind of cool humidity that makes you understand why life has organised itself around this forest for thousands of years.

Communities such as the Gondi, Maria, Muria, Dhurwa, and Bhabra have lived in close sync with this ecology for generations. Their knowledge is practical, precise, and deeply seasonal: how tightly bamboo fibre must be compressed for different weaves,

when mahua flowers ferment best, and the spring timing when red weaver ants build nests that can be reached for harvesting.

They know which barks heal and which harm, when fish run upstream, and how bird behaviour hints at shifting weather. In Bastar, nature is not scenery. It is a working library.

THE KONDAGAON WORKSHOP: 4,000 YEARS IN ONE ROOM

In the forge villages of Kondagaon district, Dhokra bell metal casting continues through a method that reaches back to the Indus Valley Civilisation. The lost-wax technique used here mirrors processes associated with Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, a reminder that "heritage" is not always behind glass.

Watching a piece come alive is a slow, mesmerising lesson. A clay core is shaped first. Beeswax is layered and threaded with hair-fine detail, then sealed inside a protective clay shell.

Heat burns the wax away, leaving a hollow cavity that receives molten bell metal, typically an alloy mix of copper, brass, and zinc.

Once cooled, the mould is broken and the final form emerges. No two castings match. Each carries tiny signatures of the maker's hand, the wax flow, the temperature, the cooling.

Bastar's Dhokra also speaks in symbols. Sun and moon motifs, reverence for fields and forests, mountains and jungles treated as living presence, and figurines of Danteshwari Mata, the region's revered goddess, appear not as decorative trends but as belief systems shaped into metal.

Much of this skill travels through families by demonstration and repetition, not written instruction. It is knowledge absorbed over years, not downloaded in a day.

KONDAGAON AS CRAFT CITY

Kondagaon is often called Shilp Sheher, and the name makes sense the moment you walk through its lanes. Craft here is not a showcase. It is a village economy in motion.

You may see wrought iron turned into deity sculptures using hand-forging methods that resist mechanisation. Traditional furnaces and manual tools keep the process rooted in old rhythms.



Bellmetal Craft Making, Dhokra. Image Courtesy: Unexplored Bastar



Narayanpur Haat Bazaar, Bastar. Image Courtesy: D'source

Woodcraft sits close by, functional and sturdy: agricultural implements, storage boxes, and home pillars made by communities specialising in carpentry.

Narrative wooden sculptures bring another layer, depicting domestic life, hunts, and festivals carved into sal, teak, and white wood. Terracotta, shaped using Indravati River clay, becomes votive animals elephants, deer, tigers, birds offered in rituals and temples.

Then comes bamboo, practical and endlessly adaptable: mats for drying grain, baskets for carrying forest produce, wall hangings that double as room dividers, fishing traps calibrated to river depths, and even musical instruments used in ceremonies.

The striking part is the discipline of purpose. In Bastar, objects earn their place. Waste is rare. Even bamboo shoots are harvested for food during the monsoon, a reminder that craft and cuisine often share the same source.



Wood Carving in Nathiyanawagaon. Image Courtesy: Chattisgarh Tourism Board



Dussehra in Jagdalpur, Bastar. Image Courtesy: Chhattisgarh Tourism Board

WHEN ECOLOGY BECOMES FOOD

Tribal cuisine here reads like a seasonal handbook. Dishes are shaped around forest resources, harvest cycles, and methods of preservation refined over time. One of the most talked-about examples is chaprah, the red ant chutney.

Red weaver ants are collected in spring, often from sal and mango tree nests when colonies are active and accessible. The harvest is not gentle; bites are expected, accepted, and treated as part of the work.

What results is sharp, vibrant, and intensely local, a flavour that tells you immediately that food here is not about novelty, it is about knowledge.

MUSIC, SONG, AND THE SOUND OF COMMUNITY

Bastar's cultural life is not confined to staged performances. Music and song thread through gatherings, rituals, and

celebrations, carrying stories, humour, devotion, and memory.

Travellers who stay long enough often find that the most powerful "show" happens informally, when people sing without an audience in mind. It is an atmosphere you feel, not something you tick off.

HOW TO TRAVEL HERE, RESPECTFULLY

Bastar rewards travellers who come with curiosity and restraint. This is a place to watch processes, meet makers, and learn why a market day matters. Buy directly when possible.

Ask before photographing people or rituals. Treat workshops as workplaces, not sets. Give time the dignity it requires, because in Bastar, skill is measured in seasons and years, not quick demonstrations.

THE REFRESHING SIDE OF TRIBAL INDIA

For travellers seeking India's lesser-known cultural landscapes, Bastar offers something unusually grounding. Craft is not separated from life. Forest knowledge is not romanticised, it is practiced.

Markets are not curated, they are essential. Music is not a performance product, it is a shared language. You leave with more than souvenirs. You leave with a sharper sense of how culture survives when it remains useful, communal, and proudly alive.



Battisa Temple, Barsur, Chhattisgarh. Image Courtesy: Unexplored Bastar



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Pink Chinese Peony Flowers. Image Courtesy: Dagmara Dombrowska, Pexels

THE ART OF THE BOUQUET

Make the bouquet speak for you

M GOUTHAM

The right stems do more than look lovely in a vase. They carry meaning in their very being and often manage to say what we struggle to say out loud. The language of flowers speaks in multitudes. The colour, shape, and fragrance of each flower come together to create a bouquet that can be bold, gentle, celebratory or quiet.

Valentine's flowers often get chosen on autopilot: the same roses, the same hurried bouquet, the same safe pick. But once you know what different blooms and colours mean, the bouquet stops being decoration and starts doing the talking for you, saying exactly what you meant, even if you never found the words.

RED ROSE

The classic that everyone goes for the rose reads like a declaration of love. The red rose, while being the most enduring Valentine's bloom, might also seem like a cliche, an automatic choice; here is where the bouquets come to save the day.

The red rose can pair beautifully with pink roses, the latter

bringing down the intensity while introducing a softer glow to the bouquet. A daring option would be to pair the red rose with a white lily. Absolute contrasts in terms of colour, shape and meaning, this can create a striking yet balanced bouquet that is sure to catch anyone's eye.

WHITE LILY

The white lily is unique among these flowers; it stands apart even from other lilies as the singular symbol of pure love. It signals pure emotions, genuine admiration, sincerity and devotion.

It speaks of a dedication and the choice of choosing each other again and again, showing up every day, a love that is consistent and stable. In many ways, the white lily is the inverse of the red rose, which announces desire and fiery passion. Let the lily lead if the emotion you want to express is clear and certain; this flower is almost sacred in its simplicity.

For a bouquet that shows off white lilies, pair it up with Peonies that add a soft richness. Or perhaps use pink roses that speak of all tender emotions. Don't add too many greens; let the white shine through.

PINK ROSE

The pink rose is for a quieter romance; it speaks of affection and admiration, a tenderness that is safe and soft. It signals a relationship built on companionship that shows up with patience and warmth.

Once you have chosen the pink rose to lead your bouquet, lean into the language of softness. One idea is to add peonies that add a celebratory note to the bouquet. Bring Carnations that complement the colours and add texture while maintaining the softness.

Another great option would be white or pink lilies that add a sharpness to the bouquet balancing out the softness of the rose while bringing harmony to the language of the bouquet by bringing in the symbols of pure love and devotion.

LILY

Lilies are one of the classic flowers for any bouquet. There is a sense of maturity that lilies bring to a bouquet. The symbolism of lilies leans into commitment, respect and deep emotions. They are composed and intentional; suited for a relationship that is steady, stable and lasting.

While a bouquet of pink Lilies and bouquets that mix different lilies are fantastic. One could also pair lilies with softer flowers, which brings more romance to the bouquet than the Lily which is earnest and true.

Add some roses, preferably pink, that bring the softness without sacrificing what the lily stands for. Bring in tulips for a modern silhouette, which makes for a more unique bouquet combination.

GERBERA

Gerberas are sunshine, they symbolise joy, optimism and emotions felt with the whole heart. A perfect choice for couples who go through humour and friendship. It speaks of the ease



Bouquet of lilies. Image courtesy: Buredim Floral Art

and joy of familiarity; this is a flower perfect for a relationship that feels like home.

While gerberas by themselves make an amazing bouquet, there are many ways to bring sophistication and elegance to this beauty. Go unorthodox. Gerberas often look more beautiful in a basket than a normal bouquet. Choose a palette to work with.

Pair with tulips for modern lines and sincerity. Add pink roses for softness. Carnations support longevity and texture. Keep the arrangement airy and cheerful, not crowded.



Gerbera flower. Image Courtesy: Haticekesnik, Pexels



Carnations Bouquet. Image courtesy: Наталья Макарова, Pexels



Girl With Lotus Bouquet. Image courtesy: Tuankiettd, Pexels

CARNATION

Carnations are simple, familiar and often underestimated for their romantic potential. But it is a familiarity that can be leaned into, they symbolise affection, fascination and enduring care. It also speaks of the normal days when love does not glitter and shine but stays real.

There are many ways to elevate Carnations. Pink roses add romance and refinement. Tulips bring honest emotion and clean shape. Add a few gerberas to bring more happiness and brightness. Choose fresh greenery to keep the bouquet modern.

PEONIES

Peonies embody abundance. They symbolise romance, prosperity and lasting happiness. Anyone who has seen a bouquet of peonies can attest to its air of celebration and unmistakable aura of lushness. This flower looks ahead brings wishes of a beautiful life ahead, filled with warmth, comfort and shared joys.



White lily. Image courtesy: Daria Grey, Pexels



Pink Gerbera Flower Bouquet. Image Courtesy: winni.in

This flower is much like gerberas in that regard, but it is also the perfect flower for milestones, it announces itself like red roses, while retaining tenderness and warmth. Perfect to gift the person who feels like home.

Peonies are the all-rounders of the flower world. They are fantastic as a centrepiece, amazing to pair with other flowers, and an absolute delight altogether. Adding pink roses deepens the romance. White lilies to add devotion and polish. Maybe even try a small number of tulips provide structure and elegance. Choose soft greenery so the bouquet stays plush and luxurious.

THE BOUQUET CODE

Pick one main element that carries the emotional headline, then add two supporting layers that soften, refine, or brighten the mood. When you add too many "messages" at once, the bouquet can look busy, and the meaning gets muddled.

Choose a palette with intention. Deep reds and wine tones read bold and devoted. Blush, soft pink, and peach feel tender and affectionate. Whites and creams suggest sincerity and calm. Use greenery as a clean accent rather than extra volume.

Shape is what makes it look styled. While it's completely fine to lean into a soft or sharp bouquet, also try combining round, romantic forms for softness with sharp and defined shapes to add structure and sophistication. Finish with something airy for movement, so the bouquet feels effortless rather than packed.

Most importantly, match the bouquet to the person, not the occasion. Choose your partner's favourite flowers and colours, and adapt the principles to create your bouquet. Let your Bouquet become a memory and message, a feeling, held in petals.



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TEDDY BEAR LOVE

Some love is loud, a teddy bear offers the quieter kind, constant and uncomplicated

TT BUREAU



Most of us have one somewhere. Maybe it's tucked away in a closet, sitting on a shelf, or still taking up space on the bed. For something made of fabric and stuffing, teddy bears have a weird amount of power over us. They're everywhere, in hospitals, gift shops, Valentine's displays, and yes, even in the homes of adults who would never admit it at work.

So what's the deal? Why do these fuzzy toys refuse to go away, and why do we keep buying them, keeping them, and sometimes even talking to them when no one's looking?

THE THERAPY YOU CAN HOLD

When you're little, a teddy bear is more than a toy. Psychologists have this term, "transitional object", which basically means it's the thing that helps kids feel safe when they're venturing away from mom and dad. First day of school? Bring the bear. Sleeping at Grandma's house? The bear comes too. Doctor's appointment? You get the idea.

What makes them work is the combination of soft texture, familiar smell, and the fact that they're always there. Unlike actual people, teddy bears don't leave, get angry, or tell you to grow up. They're portable security, a piece of home you can take anywhere.

And that connection doesn't just disappear when you become an adult. Studies show that tons of adults still have their childhood stuffed animals, and plenty more buy new ones as grown-ups. And contrary to what you might think, therapists are actually saying it's healthy.

Holding something soft like a teddy bear when you're anxious can genuinely help. It can make sleep come more easily. It can bring back good memories when you're dealing with loss or stress. It is there for school exams, bad breakups, new jobs, and new destinations. In a life where everything keeps changing, the bear stays the same.

TOKEN OF CARE KEPT CLOSE

Adult teddy bear ownership is surprisingly common. Partners hide little bears in each other's suitcases before business trips. Someone might joke about their significant other still having a childhood teddy, only to realise they find it kind of sweet. After a brutal day, even the most professional, put-together person might feel better just having that soft, familiar thing nearby.

Modern therapists are actually encouraging this. Instead of seeing it as immature, they frame it as self-awareness. Recognising that you have emotional needs and finding



Image courtesy: Divya Nithi, Pinterest

simple ways to meet them. The bear is offering a different kind of comfort, one that's always available and never complicated.

Think of it as keeping in touch with your inner child, staying connected to the part of yourself that's more open, vulnerable, and honest. Adults spend so much energy being capable and tough. The teddy bear is the one thing that says it's okay to need comfort sometimes.

TEDDY BEARS AND ROMANCE

This emotional connection is exactly why teddy bears became such a big deal in romantic gift-giving. In India, there's even a specific day for it, Teddy Day, on February 10th, part of the whole Valentine's Week. The idea is to give your partner something that represents warmth, safety, and affection all wrapped up in one fuzzy package.

Walk into any gift shop in early February, and you'll see what this looks like in practice. Red bears, pink bears, cream-colored bears holding hearts, wearing tiny t-shirts with "I Love You" printed on them, clutching plastic roses or little rings. Shops bundle them with chocolates, flowers, and cakes to create these multi-part romantic gestures.

Customisation has become elaborate too. You can get bears with names stitched on the paw, important dates embroidered on ribbons, or photos printed on their little shirts. Some bears even have voice recorders hidden inside. Press the paw, and you hear "I love you" in the gifter's actual voice.

What makes it work is that a teddy bear brings childhood comfort into adult romance. It's less intimidating than expensive jewellery or overly formal gifts, but it carries just as much meaning. Over the years, that bear becomes a part of the relationship's story. There for anniversaries, arguments that got resolved, quiet evenings on the couch. It soaks up the relationship's emotional history.



Image courtesy: Sean Twomey, Pexels

MODERN POP-CULTURE LEGENDS

Part of why teddy bears stick around is how often they show up in stories. Winnie-the-Pooh might be the most famous, a "bear of very little brain" who spends his time thinking about honey and friendship, asking surprisingly deep questions in the gentlest possible way. Generations grew up with Pooh, and he shaped how we think about what a bear character should be.

Then there's Paddington, the polite bear from Peru who shows up at a London train station with a note asking someone to please look after him. He's about feeling lost in a big city and finding kindness anyway. Or Corduroy, the department store bear waiting on a shelf, hoping someone will choose him, a story about belonging and being wanted.

On TV and in movies, bears have gone in all directions. The Care Bears were emotional guardians, each one representing



Image courtesy: Teddyday.co, Instagram



Teddy Bear Clinic. Image courtesy: Gigi's Playhouse

something like bravery or friendship. Pixar's Lotso in Toy Story 3 flipped the script entirely. He looked like the perfect teddy bear, round and strawberry-scented, but underneath lies bitterness shaped by early abandonment.

All these different versions show how flexible the teddy bear image is. But no matter the story, the bear is always tied to human emotions somehow.

TURNING CHECKUPS LESS SCARY

Beyond gifts and stories, teddy bears actually serve practical purposes in healthcare. A lot of children's hospitals run "teddy bear clinics" where kids bring their stuffed animals

for pretend medical checkups. The doctor examines the bear first, maybe gives it a pretend shot or bandages its arm. The idea is to make the medical stuff less scary. When a kid sees that the bear survived the injection just fine, they feel braver about getting their own.

Technology is getting in on this, too. Some major children's hospitals use soft robotic bears that can move a little, talk, and make basic facial expressions. They respond to touch and can play games that distract kids from pain or fear. Other designers make weighted teddy bears specifically for anxiety and insomnia, or bears that connect to apps to play calming sounds or guide breathing exercises.

Even for adults, therapists sometimes suggest keeping a bear around during rough patches. It sounds almost too simple to work, but grabbing something soft during a panic attack or a sleepless night can make a real difference.

In elder care and mental health facilities, soft bears help reduce agitation and give people something gentle to hold, especially helpful for those with dementia or anyone who needs comfort when human contact isn't available.

WARM FEELINGS AND BIG BUSINESS

Behind all the warm feelings is serious money. The teddy bear represents a multi-billion-dollar chunk of the global toy industry. People buy them for new babies, birthdays, holidays, and as personalised gifts year-round.

Build-A-Bear Workshop turned buying a teddy into an experience. You pick an empty bear shell, help stuff it at a machine, add a little fabric heart, then dress it up with clothes and accessories. It transforms a cheap stuffed toy into a memory that families photograph and talk about, making the emotional connection even stronger. The company has partnered with movie studios, sports teams, and fashion brands, proving how versatile the basic teddy form is.



Image courtesy: Atlantic Ambience, Pexels

The whole phenomenon started back in 1902. U.S. President Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt refused to shoot a trapped bear during a hunting trip. A political cartoon about it inspired some shopkeepers in Brooklyn to make "Teddy's bear." Meanwhile, in Germany, Margarete Steiff was creating her own jointed plush bear. From those two separate starting points, the teddy bear spread across the world.

On the collector's side, high-end names like the company Steiff is legendary among collectors, especially for early mohair bears with their trademark "button in ear." Rare bears from the early 1900s have sold at auction for six-figure sums. Other early makers like Bing and Schuco also command high prices. Collectors examine every detail, eye material, stitching patterns, fabric type, with the same intensity people bring to vintage watches or fine art.

ONE BEAR, MANY ROLES

Beyond commerce and collecting, teddy bears carry meaning that crosses cultural lines. They represent childhood innocence and parental love. In stories, they protect against nightmares just by being there. In other contexts, bears symbolise hope after tragedy, solidarity after disasters, or simple kindness in everyday life. The combination is interesting. The strength of a wild animal mixed with the gentleness of a soft toy creates this idea of protective tenderness.

The teddy bear is way more than a cute decoration. It represents childhood innocence and parental love, a character in countless stories, a tool for therapists, a serious collector's



Image courtesy: Aedrian Salazar, Unsplash

item, and an everyday symbol of love and comfort. Whether it shows up as a Valentine's gift, sits in a hospital bed, stars in a bedtime story, or gets sold at auction for more than a car, the same basic promise runs through it all.

It offers something soft to hold when life feels hard. In a world that constantly demands that we be tough, capable, and fine all the time, the bear makes a different offer. That there is strength and even dignity in allowing yourself to need comfort.



Image courtesy: Anya Juarez Tenorio, Pexels

SETTING UP A PERFECT WINE DATE

Romance, like wine, reveals its best notes when unhurried and shared

TT BUREAU

There's something about wine that works for romance. Maybe it's the way two glasses catch the candlelight, or how sharing a bottle slows down time enough for real conversation. Whatever it is, wine has been part of love stories for centuries, and this Valentine's Day, India's wine scene offers more ways than ever for memorable moments.

India's wine market is growing fast, expected to reach nearly \$1 billion by 2034, up significantly since its \$266 million valuation in 2025. That means better wines, more vineyards worth visiting, and plenty of options for planning a quiet night in or a weekend escape into wine country.

WHY WINE AND ROMANCE GO TOGETHER

Wine does something interesting for our brains. When you taste wine together, really taste it and not only drink it, you're

engaging all five senses at once. The colour, the aroma, the texture, the taste, even the sound of the pour. Research shows that couples who do wine tastings together report 37% higher emotional closeness. That's because your brains actually start syncing up as you share reactions across different flavours.

It is quite close to magic. When you're both trying your best at figuring out if that's blackberry or plum you're tasting, or deciding on hints of vanilla, you're being vulnerable in a low-stakes way. You're experiencing something new together. And that shared discovery creates a connection.

Plus, there's the practical side. A glass or two relaxes you without overwhelming you, making conversation flow more naturally. Studies even show moderate wine consumption can improve circulation and promote bonding hormones. The key here is moderation. One or two glasses enhances the mood. Any more than that kills it.



Image courtesy: Jep Gambardella, Pexels

THE TASTING GAME EVERYONE WINS

You don't need sommelier credentials for creating a romantic wine experience. Here are some ideas that work at home or out on the town:

Try a blind tasting. Cover the labels and take turns guessing what you're drinking. It's playful, gets you laughing, and there's no wrong answer. Start with a white and a red, and see what you can pick up. Citrus? Berries? Oak? The guessing is half the fun.

Build a board. Charcuterie isn't complicated. Grab some good cheese, salami, crackers, maybe some dried fruit and nuts. The salty, fatty flavours make wine taste better, and feeding each other is its own kind of fun.

Slow the rhythm of the evening. A patient pour, a pause between sips, and the simple act of letting the wine open up can turn an ordinary night into a shared experience.

Add music. Classical ragas or soft jazz work beautifully. The rhythms mirror the way wine flavours unfold, slowly, with layers.

If you're going out, look for places offering guided flights. Many venues in Delhi and other major cities in India now have sommeliers who'll walk you through different wines, teaching you how swirling and sniffing work like a pro.

About 25% of couples who do this return for their anniversaries as well.

THE BEST WINES FOR ROMANCE

Not all wines set the same mood. Here's what works for Valentine's Day:

Bold reds like Shiraz bring intensity. Deep berry flavours, a bit of spice. These are passionate wines. Pair with lamb biryani or anything with rich, bold flavours. The tannins cut through the heat and make everything taste deeper.

Sparkling rosé is all about celebration and flirtation. Those bubbles, that strawberry brightness. It is perfect paired with chocolate desserts or on its own while you're getting ready for dinner.

Chenin Blanc is India's secret weapon. Nashik makes excellent ones, floral, crisp, and refreshing. They're fantastic with creamy curries like paneer tikka or chicken korma. The acidity cuts through the richness beautifully.

Pinot Noir is the elegant choice. Silky, subtle, with cherry notes. Try it with oysters if you're feeling adventurous, or with salmon. It's refined without being stuffy.

Syrah has that earthy, peppery quality that works with almost anything savoury. It's robust enough for rich meats but interesting enough to keep you talking about it.

The key to pairing is balance. Fatty foods need acidic wines to cut through them.

Spicy dishes need something bold enough to stand up to the heat. Sweet desserts pair with sweeter wines or dry sparkling ones for contrast.



Image courtesy: Mustafa Turkeri, Pexels

ESCAPE INTO NASHIK WINE COUNTRY

If you really want a special Valentine's Day, consider a trip to Nashik. It's India's wine capital, about three hours outside Mumbai, and it's genuinely stunning. Vineyards unfold across wide open land, backed by the Sahyadri range, complemented by resorts built for unhurried living and uninterrupted views that rival anything in Tuscany.

Sula Vineyards is the most famous, and for good reason. Their Source resort has infinity pools overlooking the vines, spa treatments, and you can actually participate in grape stomping if you visit between January and March. Yes, you get purple feet. Yes, it's ridiculous fun.

Beyond by Sula offers lake views and sunset wine sessions that are worth the trip alone. Vallonne Vineyards has a French-style boutique hotel that's intimate and luxurious. It is India's first dedicated wine hotel.

Most vineyards offer tours where sommeliers walk you through the process, from grape to glass. You'll taste wines right where they're made, learn about Nashik's unique terroir (the soil and climate that give wines their character), and understand why Indian Chenin Blanc is gaining international recognition.



Image courtesy: Leeloo The First, Pexels



Image Courtesy: Royalchampagne.com

Some places even offer hot air balloon rides over the vineyards, floating above 350 acres of grapevines at sunrise, glass of sparkling wine in hand. It's the kind of experience to be talked about fondly for years to come.

MAKING IT SPECIAL

Planning a big Nashik wine weekend or keeping it intimate at home? Here's how you make it memorable:

Create a ritual. Maybe it's a monthly wine tasting at home where you explore different regions. Maybe it's an annual vineyard visit. The tradition becomes part of your story together.

Learn together. Take a wine course, watch tasting videos, and visit different wine bars. Shared learning creates shared language and inside jokes.

Give thoughtfully. A rare vintage, a wine club membership, or a beautifully made decanter shows more thought than generic gifts.

Oak-aged reserves coming out of Nashik vineyards make heirloom-worthy presents.

Don't overthink it. Wine is meant for enjoyment, not stress. If you like it, that's all that matters. The "right" wine is the one you both enjoy drinking.

THIS VALENTINE'S DAY

India's wine culture is hitting its stride as more couples look for experiences over things. Wine offers both the experience of tasting and learning together, and the thing you can hold, share, and remember.

So this February 14th, slow down. Pour carefully. Taste deeply. Let wine do what it does best. Bring people together, spark conversation, and turn an ordinary evening into something worth savouring.

Because the best romance isn't rushed. It's sipped slowly, appreciated fully, and shared with someone who makes every moment and every glass better.



Image courtesy: Gildo Cancelli, Pexels

GREAT PENMANSHIP

While the art of penmanship is all but dead, this special edition pen by Mont Blanc is sure to revive it. Designed as a tribute to Jimi Hendrix, this pen gives out a distinctly retro vibe with its stylish black cover. The rollerball tip uses water-based ink that makes writing sharper, clearer and more vibrant.



LOVE, WRAPPED IN CHOCOLATE: HOW THE WORLD COURTS THROUGH COCOA

Chocolate speaks of love, memory, travel, and moments that linger

TT BUREAU



Image Courtesy: Adonyi Foto, Pexels

Chocolate has travelled farther than almost any indulgence. Long before it became a Valentine's Day staple, it crossed oceans and empires, slipping into cafés, rituals, gift boxes, and the small moments people remember.

Across the world, travellers recognise chocolate as a language of affection. Europe made it gift-ready through café culture and boutique traditions. Japan turned it precise and symbolic, shaped by seasonal customs. In Latin America, cacao's ceremonial roots still echo in ideas of connection and continuity. In India's cities, chocolate has found its place alongside mithai, flowers, and handwritten notes.

What keeps chocolate romantic is its adaptability. It suits winter streets and tropical markets, grand gestures and quiet ones. For travellers, it also becomes a souvenir of feeling: a bar bought on a side lane, a tasting shared after dark, a box carried home with a story inside.

BELGIUM'S SWEET RITUAL: THE PRALINE, THE BOX, THE MOMENT

Belgium is where chocolate moved beyond everyday indulgence and became a gesture with meaning. A defining moment arrived in 1912 with Neuhaus Chocolates, founded in Brussels, which is recognised as the creator of the modern praline. Jean Neuhaus Jr. developed the filled chocolate as a centre enclosed in a shell, but the next innovation followed soon after. To protect these pralines, the maison introduced the ballotin, a box designed so chocolates could travel without damage. This changed consumer behaviour.

Belgium taught the world a lesson: chocolate becomes romantic the moment it is chosen for someone else.

FRANCE: WHEN CHOCOLATE BECOMES A LANGUAGE OF LOVE

Chocolate was not made into a grandiose proclamation of love

in France. Rather, it transformed it into something more private and subdued. The association between chocolate and romance in France grew alongside Parisian café culture and the rise of specialist chocolatiers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chocolate shifted away from overt sweetness and towards complexity. Darker cacao, refined ganaches, and controlled portions allowed it to sit naturally within romantic moments, often shared at the end of a meal or offered as a thoughtful addition to flowers or wine.

Paris continues to define how chocolate fits into romance. A box of chocolates rarely announces itself. It arrives quietly, completes the moment, and leaves a lasting impression.

France taught the world that chocolate becomes romantic not by trying harder, but by knowing when enough is enough.

SWITZERLAND: COMFORT, PURITY, AND CHOCOLATE AS ENDURING LOVE

Switzerland gave chocolate a different emotional role. If France made it subtle and Belgium made it ceremonial, Switzerland made it reassuring. The connection between Swiss chocolate and affection developed alongside the country's mastery of milk chocolate in the late nineteenth century. Switzerland's access to high-quality alpine milk transformed chocolate's texture and flavour, making it smoother, creamier, and deeply comforting. Over time, this sensory comfort translated naturally into emotional meaning.

Switzerland taught the world that love does not always need intensity.

ITALY: PASSION, POETRY, AND CHOCOLATE AS A DECLARATION OF LOVE

No brand captures this better than Baci Perugina. Introduced in the 1920s, Baci transformed chocolate into a literal love letter by enclosing a small note inside every piece. These messages, printed in multiple languages, turned each chocolate into a personal declaration. Over time, exchanging Baci became a shared ritual, especially on Valentine's Day, when words mattered as much as flavour.

Italy taught the world that chocolate can speak to the heart.

JAPAN: CHOCOLATE AS A CODED CONFESION OF LOVE

Chocolate became a language with rules, timing, and emotional accuracy thanks to Japan. The tradition took shape in the mid-twentieth century, when chocolate companies encouraged women to gift chocolate to men on Valentine's Day. Over time, this evolved into a finely balanced emotional code. Honmei choco refers to chocolate given out of genuine romantic affection, while giri choco is offered out of social obligation. This distinction gave chocolate emotional weight.

The tradition does not end on Valentine's Day. White Day, observed a month later, requires men to reciprocate with gifts, often chocolate, reinforcing balance and mutual acknowledgement in relationships.



ITC Fabelle, Handcrafted Luxury. Image Courtesy: Fabelle.in

Japan showed the world that chocolate can say what words sometimes cannot.

LATIN AMERICA: WHERE CACAO BEGAN AND LOVE WAS FIRST RITUALISED

In Latin America, chocolate did not begin as romance. It began as reverence. Long before Valentine's Day existed, cacao held symbolic meaning tied to fertility, life, and connection.

Latin America taught the world that chocolate became romantic long before it was commercial.

INDIA: WHEN CHOCOLATE BECAME THE LOVE TOKEN

In India, chocolate became linked with love because it was easy to understand, widely available, and simple to share. Cadbury



Neuhaus Chocolates. Image Courtesy: Cococart.in



Caja de Bombones. Image Courtesy: Quebo.mx

played the most decisive role after entering India in 1948. Its campaigns consistently framed chocolate as an uncomplicated expression of affection. Amul added a different emotional register. Together, Cadbury and Amul defined Indian chocolate consumption for decades.

This began to shift in the last decade. Artisanal and bean-to-bar chocolates started entering the higher end of the market. Brands such as Mason & Co, Naviluna, Paul and Mike, Subko Cacao, Manam Chocolate and Ziaho Chocolate began working directly with Indian cacao, focusing on fermentation, roasting, and reduced sugar.



Baci Perugina Chocolates. Image Courtesy: Baciperugina.com

At the luxury end, ITC Fabelle represents a corporate-led entry into premium chocolate. Positioned within ITC Hotels and select retail formats, Fabelle bridges industrial scale and artisanal technique. Place also shaped this evolution. Ooty developed a strong identity around locally made chocolates. Similar cultures emerged in Kodaikanal, Munnar, and Puducherry. At the retail end, Tigmon The Chocolate Mall in Gujarat turned chocolate buying into a curated experience.

WHY SHARED CHOCOLATE EXPERIENCES FEEL MORE ROMANTIC

Chocolate feels most memorable when it is experienced together. The shift is subtle but meaningful. Romance moves from exchange to participation, turning flavour into memory and choice into conversation. Factory visits and bean-to-bar workshops take this connection further. Couples grind cacao, temper chocolate, and mould bars together, learning patience and precision along the way.

What makes these journeys romantic is not luxury, but presence. There is no perfect gift, no right choice, only shared curiosity. Couples remember the laughter during tastings, the mistakes during workshops, and the quiet moments between bites.

WHEN LOVE LINGERS LONGER THAN THE LAST BITE

Chocolate endures as a symbol of love because it asks us to slow down. Across cultures, chocolate became romantic not through excess, but through meaning. What travels best with chocolate is not the box, but the memory attached to it.

In a world where romance is often rushed, chocolate offers pause. It invites touch, conversation, and presence. Love, like cocoa, reveals itself slowly. And when it does, it leaves something behind that no wrapping can contain.



Tablette Fourrée Arya Chocolat au Lait. Image Courtesy: Pierreherme.com



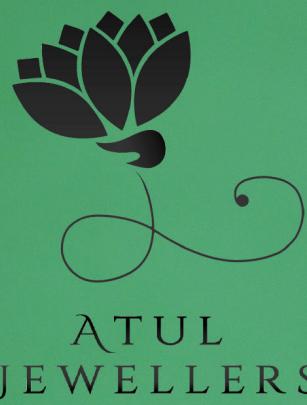
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