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POPPING THE QUESTION IN STYLE

AUSTRALIANS are a pragmatic lot. According to leading travel agents, couples often get engaged during a holiday and not only for romantic reasons. Many are paying for holidays in advance by taking advantage of cheap flights and a strong Australian dollar, so often the backdrop for a proposal is selected before the ring. Destination weddings have also become incredibly popular over the past few years, as couples head off with their families and friends to enjoy their ceremony and reception away from home.

The world is full of drop-dead gorgeous romantic locales. But why stop at sealing a marriage proposal with a glass of champagne? Why not go the whole hog and book a stay at the Chateau de Fere near Reims. Formerly the home of Charlotte de Montmorency, a 16th century beauty who caught the wandering eye of the French king, Henri IV, the chateau delivers in spades from the romantic mediaeval atmosphere through the plush bedrooms and gourmet restaurant with a wine list of 10,000 bottles, including the finest tete de cuvee champagnes.

A gourmet picnic in New York's Central Park takes some beating in the proposal stakes. Stay well away from The Ramble, of course, which has an unsavoury reputation as a gay cruising spot. To extend the romantic mood, one of the top places to stay is The Lowell, a 1920s townhouse-style hotel on the Upper East Side with a truly residential feel. Rooms No 10C and 11C have wood-burning fireplaces to cuddle up in front of. Where to buy the vino for your alfresco event? Sherry-Lehmann, 505 Park Ave, is easily one of the best wine shops in the US. It will even deliver to the hotel before you set off to do the deed.

Niagara Falls has been attracting honeymooners since Napoleon's brother Jerome, once the King of Westphalia, turned up with his first wife, Elizabeth Patterson, a Baltimore socialite, in 1803. More than 20 million tourists converge on the world's most famous waterfall each year, but you

can avoid the tacky elements by crossing to the Canadian side. Do all the touristy things, by all means, such as the Maid of the Mist Cruise, but bed down in the tranquillity of The Sterling Inn and Spa, Niagara's only boutique hotel. It will even pack a gourmet wine and food picnic basket for the big occasion.

The Bulgari Resort in Bali specialises in weddings and even offers types - the Water Wedding, the Beach Wedding, the Pavilion Wedding and the Gazebo Wedding, complete with a guaranteed 5000 flowers for the occasion. Champagne for all guests is included in all the wedding packages and there's plenty to drink to. Located at Jimbaran, the cliff top location is tailor-made for a proposal, too, whether you stage the

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scene on one of the spectacular terraces, on the beach or in the comfort and privacy of one of the plush villas, all with ocean views. There are also three restaurants and a bar to toast the auspicious day or night. The resort's Il Ristorante restaurant was voted Best Hotel Restaurant in the World by the International Food and Beverage Forum in 2011, so music needn't be the only food of love.

Love is eternal and so is Rome. Years ago, a boyfriend and I were staying in a none-too-salubrious hotel in central Rome when an American couple asked us to be witnesses at their Italian civil wedding. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision and they didn't have any friends and family in town to do the honours. We set out for the registry office and the Italian officials rose to the occasion, from the caring celebrant who pronounced "amore" with real tenderness to two security guards whose uniforms were so grand they looked like princes.

For anyone planning to exchange rings in a more upmarket style, it's smart to book a stay at Portrait Suites, located in a classic palazzo on the Via Condotti. Owned by the Ferragamo family of luxury shoe fame, the rooftop terrace serves up some of the best bellinis and panoramic views in Rome.

For Downton Abbey fans, Highclere Castle, the home of the Earl and Countess of Carnarvon, doubles as the family pile of the fictional Crawley family and even before the worldwide success of the TV series enjoyed a brisk business as a setting for weddings and engagements. Only 50 minute's drive from Heathrow, the castle is licenced to hold civil ceremonies and also has its own wedding coordinator. Chef Paul Brooke-Taylor will even orchestrate a Victorian menu for those who want something more than the sort of first-class modern cuisine you can find anywhere. There are several settings in the castle you can choose as a backdrop from the Drawing Room to the Victorian Library. For proposals - any tree in the surrounding parkland will do. Or, better yet, The Temple of Diana, one of four 18th-century "follies" that stud the estate. BYO Dom Perignon or something close to that level is the only choice to repeat a "Matthew and Lady Mary" moment.

To paraphrase Tony Bennett, I left my heart in Namibia. There are few parts of this lightly-populated, south-west African nation more appealing than Etosha National Park, which is bigger than the Kruger National Park in South Africa but much less visited. And if you are looking for evocative African settings, you can't go past Onguma-The Fort. The 12 mini-suites are luxuriously furnished and you can even watch wildlife from the comfort of your own veranda. The lodge claims that it offers the best sunset viewing in Namibia and it's no idle boast. Especially if you are sipping a glass of Boschendal Le Grand Pavilion Brut Rose, a South African sparkler which was named one of the top 10 best sparkling wines in the world at the 2012 Effervescents du Monde in France. 