

What You Did Not Know About Valentine's Day

Saint Valentine's Day is one of the biggest retail days in the calendar. In 2006, the average American spent around US\$100 on his or her significant other, totalling \$13.70 billion. Men typically spend about twice as much as women (in 2006 \$135.67 and \$68.64 respectively), mostly on cards, chocolates, flowers, and dinner at a swish restaurant. Approximately 180 million cards are exchanged industry-wide a year (excluding packaged kids' valentines for classroom exchanges), making Valentine's Day the second largest holiday for giving greeting cards, according to Hallmark.

The history of the tradition of dedicating the middle of February to love is complicated. The ancient Greeks dedicated that time to the rather passionate marriage of their prime gods, Zeus and Hera. In ancient Rome, on February 15, young nobles celebrated the Lupercalia which was regarded as a happy festival of purification and fertility with wild sensual dances and participants running through the streets naked striking passers-by. Apparently noble women would get in their way on purpose, because they believed that it would help with childbirth and cure barrenness.

This style of celebration proved a little too rowdy for the Christian emperors and at the end of the fifth century Pope Gelasius abolished the Lupercalia and replaced it with a festival to honour Valentine the patron saint of Lovers. Pope Galasius wisely adopted the old date for a more sedate version of a love-celebration - thus facilitating its acceptance among pagans.

He declared 14 February to be the feast of Saint Valentine. However which Saint Valentine the Pope meant to honour is not clear. Historically it is believed to be Valentine, bishop of Terni in Italy of 197 AD. He was killed during Emperor Aurelian's persecutions of Christians. It is believed by some historians that he could be one and the same as Valentine of Rome, a priest and doctor who treated the poor for free. This Valentine was martyred around 269 AD for helping imprisoned Christians. While in prison he converted his jailer by restoring sight to the jailer's daughter.

But as popular masses have a mind of their own and do not follow orders well, they chose their own Saint Valentine. During the middle ages, Valentinus of Alexandria, the ancient Egyptian city (c. 100-153) was the the most popular. He was destined for papacy, but his Gnostic preaching, and his emphasis on love in the bridal chamber, ruined his chances. Albeit his preachings made him an attractive candidate for a romantic Valentine's Day Saint.

The romantic Valentine tradition really took off in the 14th century, when courtly love was all the rage at the royal courts and it has proved immensely popular ever since.

It is interesting to note that the old Roman Catholic Calendar of Saints lists 11 Saint Valentine's Days, but in 1969 all of these were scrapped as historically insufficient. So when you are looking at your credit card statements in March pondering how your balance jumped so high, just take a moment to thank your lucky stars that there are not 11 Saint Valentine's Days.

This February, a famous landmark with a romantic history could provide the perfect location for a Valentines Day break. The Loire Valley in France fits the bill perfectly and you will not have to remortgage your home to pay your your romantic getaway.

It is said that "The Loire Valley is a Queen and the King loved her". The Loire Valley conjures up imagines of fairytale chateaux with turrets, topiary and tapestries and fine wines accompanying great food. To visit the Chateaux of the Loire is to take a romantic step back in time to past centuries of French aristocratic life. The winding Loire River cuts through the land of castles deep in France's heart. No other stretch of Loire River can boast so many royal residences, with over 120 fairytale castles and mansions lining the river bordered by vineyards.

Royalty and nobility built chateaux in this valley during the French Renaissance, and an era of pomp reigned until Henri IV moved his court to Paris. The Loire is blessed with attractions, from medieval, Renaissance, and classical chateaux to Romanesque and Gothic churches to treasures like the Apocalypse Tapestries.

The best way to enjoy the Loire Valley especially for Valentine's Day is to not just visit historic chateaux but to stay in a chateau and to experience the grandeur yourself. You will not be disappointed for the cost of a little more than a boring old hotel room you can have a palatial suite in a renaissance castle with a canopied bed fit for a king. There are many chateau in the Loire Valley now available for lodging ranging from huge more pricey chateau hotels with Michelin starred restaurants to smaller intimate homely chateaux which are run as upmarket bed and breakfasts where you may be one of only six parties staying at the chateau. For the cost of two dozen long-stemmed red roses, a box of chocolates and a fancy dinner at an expensive restaurant in England or America, you could stay in an amazing chateau in the Loire Valley for three nights and feel like royalty. What is more in February you will avoid all the tourist rush at the historic chateaux and you can snuggle up with your love in front of a roaring fire.

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About the Author

Corina Clemence runs romantic Chateau du Guerinet, near Blois a luxury chateau for up to 15 people perfect for a Valentine's Day getaway. Rent a castle in France <http://www.loirechateau.com> rent a french chateau