

2012 HONEYMOON ADVENTURE COUNTDOWN

BY JACKIE CARADONIO

ADVENTURE LEVEL



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Few trips are more celebrated than the honeymoon, and well-traveled couples are craving something a bit more exciting than traditional sun and sand. So we've rounded up 10 romantic quests, for newbies to downright daredevils, that will get your blood pumping — and make your honeymoon the talk of your social circle.

DISCOVER ANCIENT RUINS in Mexico

When it comes to ruins on the Yucatan Peninsula, Tulum gets all the buzz — and the bulk of visitors. But head farther inland to Coba, and you can not only enjoy the ruins with fewer crowds, but you can climb them too. The site's largest temple, Nohoch Muul, has a steep stone stairway to the top, strung with a guide rope to help you balance. After you summit, reward your efforts with a dip in the crisp turquoise waters of the Cenote Cho Ha sinkhole, a short drive away. When you're ready to rejoin the crowds, head to one of the Yucatan's more modern attractions, like Xel-Ha aquatic park, where you can snorkel through a natural aquarium of colorful reef fish and swim with resident dolphins and manatees.

STAY Each of the 41 palapa-style villas (all either built new or spruced up as of December 2011) at Playa del Carmen's sexy **The Tides Riviera Maya** features a hammock-strung terrace, an outdoor shower and a private plunge pool. Do as the Maya did with a *temazcal* (sweat lodge) ritual at the acclaimed spa, followed by an alfresco dinner of "Mayaterranean" fusion cuisine overlooking the ocean. Bonus: The resort offers specialized guided tours of all local ruins, including Coba, Tulum and Chichen Itza. *From \$585 per room.*



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Q FACE OFF WITH GLACIERS in Alaska

It may be hard to believe Alaska's massive glaciers were once even larger than they are today, but since 1850, the great northern ice shelves have been steadily retreating. Cruise through Glacier Bay and the Inside Passage for a close-up view of these icy marvels before they diminish any further. On Holland America Line's seven-day Glacier Discovery cruise between Vancouver, Canada, and Anchorage, Alaska, you'll hear the thunderous sound of icebergs breaking from the shelf as you coast through sea lanes surrounded by steep, forested mountains and ice. While docked in Juneau, take a helicopter tour over Mendenhall Glacier before landing on Juneau Icefield for a hike through its sprawling icescape. At nearby Norris Glacier, visit the dog-sled camp, where you'll learn to mush your own team of huskies through the snowy terrain. Back on the water, keep an eye out for humpback whales, blue whales, sea lions and otters as you cruise through serene Kenai Fjords National Park.

STAY Staterooms aboard Holland America Line's **MS Zaandam** and **MS Statendam** cruise ships are spacious and comfortable, with many including private verandas. Copious onboard amenities include a spa, a fitness center, basketball and tennis courts, a culinary-arts center, a library, a casino, and multiple restaurants, lounges and cafes. *Seven nights from \$699 per person.*



TRACK WILDLIFE in Botswana

Botswana's Okavango Delta, a wetland paradise located in the middle of the Kalahari Desert, is one of Africa's best spots for game viewing, combining open savanna (home to grazers like impala and buffaloes, and the big-cat predators who hunt them) with wetlands, where you'll spy a plethora of bird life. Explore both during morning and afternoon game drives at Momo Camp's 100,000-acre private concession inside Moremi Game Reserve. After your morning drive, have brunch in the camp's Hippo Hide, a protected enclosure set amid hippopotamus pools that provides an up-close view of the bush's most dangerous beast. During your afternoon drive, enjoy sundowners — Africa's take on happy hour — while watching the sun set behind the glowing plains. A helicopter ride provides killer aerial views of the reserve and its wild inhabitants.

STAY Momo Camp's nine elevated, tented guest rooms, connected by wooden walkways, each have an en-suite bathroom with his and hers basins, as well as an outdoor shower and a private veranda for game viewing. Mingle with fellow guests at the communal bar/library, a thatch-roof pavilion that embodies safari chic. Don't miss the resort's *boma*-style dinner, an outdoor buffet featuring traditional African dishes and entertainment set around a bonfire. *From \$1,630 per person per night, all-inclusive.*

TOP: THOMAS BARWICK/GETTY IMAGES



HARNESS THE WIND in the British Virgin Islands

If sailing the open seas is your idea of romance, the British Virgin Islands are your ultimate honeymoon playground. Set sail and explore the dozens of pristine isles in one of the **Moorings'** pristine yachts, ranging in size from 37 feet (with two cabins) to 54 feet (with five cabins, should you want to invite some friends). Don't want the work of a bareboat charter? Hire a skipper, or go all out with a full crew that will handle the sailing and cooking while you sit back and enjoy the island life — snorkeling or kayaking by day and hitting the BVI's legendary beach-bar circuit at night.

STAY When you're ready to get off the water, check into a plush beachfront suite at **Peter Island**, a private-island resort across the sound from Tortola. In addition to the fabulous spa, five private beaches and must-do Saturday-night seafood fest at Tradewinds restaurant, you'll also find water sports aplenty — from diving to windsurfing — on Deadman's Beach. *Moorings, six nights from \$1,750 per person, all-inclusive. Peter Island, from \$325 per room.*



DRIVE AN ELEPHANT in Thailand

When it comes to exploring northern Thailand's exotic bamboo forests and river trails, the best views are atop an eight-foot pachyderm. At Anantara Golden Triangle Resort & Spa's elephant camp, you'll waste no time on the ground, becoming acclimated to one of the property's 30 most popular residents on your very first day. To become a skilled mahout (elephant driver), enroll in the camp's three-day course, in which you'll learn basic commands, including *pai* (go) and *how* (stop). While you're not guiding your three-ton friend along muddy jungle trails, you can help bathe the herd in nearby Ruak River or partake in a friendly game of elephant polo. Back at the camp, catch up with the director of elephants to learn more about the animals, all of which were rescued from exploitative conditions on the streets of Bangkok or elsewhere. Upon completing a "driving" test on your final day, you're presented with an elephant-dung-paper certificate and a monogrammed mahout shirt as a souvenir.

STAY **Anantara Golden Triangle Resort & Spa** lies near the banks of the Mekong River, along the border of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos. The property includes 90 guest rooms — each featuring a balcony with a canopied daybed and an oversize terrazzo bathtub — as well as an infinity-edge pool, a small-but-sumptuous five-treatment-room spa and its own cooking school, where the half-day itinerary includes a shopping excursion to a local market. *From \$313 per room, including breakfast.*





EXPLORE UNDERWATER CAVES in Capri

This stunning Italian isle has long been a favorite escape for Mediterranean elite, luring emperors, princes and celebs with its dramatic limestone arches, thousand-foot cliffs and crystalline waters. But the mystique continues underground as well. Begin your excursion on the pebbly beaches of Marina Grande, where you can rent a private boat destined for the eastern coast. Meander through the Tyrrhenian Sea's jutting rocks until you arrive at Arco Naturale, a prehistoric formation naturally carved from a collapsed grotto. After a swim through the structure's iconic archway, stop at the spooky Grotta di Matermania, a legendary cave used as a shrine by the Romans, where you'll find ancient wall paintings and inscriptions. Head next to the world-famous Grotta Azzurra (Blue Grotto), where an oarsman manning a rowboat for two will maneuver your tiny craft through a pin-size rocky entrance. Once you're inside, shimmering nooks and cavernous passageways engulfed in a spectacular blue light will surround you.

STAY Set atop a massive cliff with views of Vesuvius and Naples, **Hotel Caesar Augustus** comprises 55 rooms and suites, each with a balcony, terrace or garden overlooking the Gulf of Naples. A panoramic infinity swimming pool, an alfresco restaurant and a terrace bar keep the jaw-dropping views in focus at all times. *From \$510 per room.*



TREK THROUGH THE AMAZON in Peru

Roughly an hour's boat ride from the nearest hint of civilization sit 741 acres of primitive tropical jungle located adjacent to the Tambopata National Reserve, a 24,711-acre private ecological park along the Madre de Dios River. Here, mingle with parrots, macaws, capuchins and spider monkeys while traversing Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica's canopy walk, a 1,100-foot complex of jiggly suspension bridges hanging amid the tallest treetops.

STAY When you're not out discovering new species or rambling through the canopy, retire to one of **Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica's** 35 thatch-roof cabanas with limited electricity (our favorite: the Canopy Tree House, a secluded cabana set nearly 90 feet in the air). Creature comforts like plunge pools, hammock-slung porches and a riverfront spa induce relaxation by day, while after dark, candles and kerosene lamps set the tone for romantic evenings. *Two nights from \$984 per room, including meals and a choice of a-la-carte guided excursions.*



CONQUER A VOLCANO in Costa Rica

Turn up the heat with a trip to the town of La Fortuna (90 miles north of the San Jose airport), where Arenal, Central America's most active volcano, bubbles and smokes with eruptions throughout the day. A guided hike near the lower slope of the 5,358-foot behemoth passes through tropical rainforest and past older lava flows. Keep an eye out for wildlife (coatis, sloths, howler monkeys) while the volcano continuously rumbles and groans in the distance. For a different perspective, take the Arenal Sky Tram to a neighboring mountaintop, where an observation deck faces Arenal's southern side. Your descent: a series of zip lines back to ground level, providing a literal bird's-eye view of the volcano as you glide through the air.

STAY Located at the base of Arenal, **Tabacon Grand Spa Thermal Resort** comprises 114 newly renovated guest rooms, plus more than 20 natural pools, mineral springs and ponds, so you're likely to have one to yourself. The Grand Spa offers 11 open-air treatment rooms and uses natural thermal waters in its hydro treatments. Bonus: The resort even boasts its own private gardens and hot springs; visit the latter at sunset and settle into thermal-spring pools to watch for bright red bursts as lava rocks tumble down Arenal's skirt. *From \$245 per room.*

KATE POWERS/GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC IMAGE COLLECTION/ALAMY

DIVE FOR PEARLS in French Polynesia

The exquisite blue waters and idyllic white-sand beaches of the Tahitian islands are no doubt its biggest draws, but add the opportunity to harvest its rare black pearls, and you have what amounts to a Polynesian holy grail. On Fakarava Island, a sliver of land located in the Tuamotus, you can visit the Havaiki Pearl Farm to experience a day in the life of a local pearl farmer — and walk away with a gleaming black beauty of your own. Snorkel above the cages containing thousands of black-lipped pearl oysters, and pick out a string for owner Joachim Dariel to retrieve. Back at the dock, choose oysters from the line to pry open until you get your winner. Next head to Havaiki's workshop, where you can have your treasure set into a necklace, ring or other bauble. Want more than one trinket? No worries — the shop sells an array of incredible pieces at prices better than you'll find back home.

STAY Other than Havaiki's five beach bungalows, **White Sand Beach Resort** is Fakarava's only stay, featuring 30 bungalows, a restaurant and a bar. Situated on a secluded lagoon, the outpost provides boating excursions to the many neighboring *motus* (reef islets), as well as unlimited use of snorkel gear, pirogue boats and kayaks. *From \$250 per room.*



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DEFY GRAVITY in New Zealand

New Zealand is often called the adventure capital of the world (after all, the Kiwis invented bungee jumping), and there's no better way to get into the spirit than with a death-defying plunge from the top of Shotover Canyon, just outside of Queenstown. The 357-foot peak features the highest bungee swing in the world, with drop speeds reaching up to 93 miles per hour. More than 70 different jumping styles include multiple tandem drops for couples who prefer to free-fall in a loving (read: clutching-each-other-for-dear-life) embrace. If that sounds too terrifying, you can soak in Shotover's vistas a host of other ways. Hop a jet boat along Shotover River to zip between jutting rock walls in a passage barely wider than the boat itself. More serene is the Skyline gondola, which slowly travels to the top of Bob's Peak for expansive vistas of South Island's sublime surroundings.

STAY Perched on a mountainside above Lake Wakatipu, Queenstown's **Matakauri Lodge** is located just a few miles downstream from Shotover Canyon. However, with 11 timber suites featuring open fireplaces and private balconies, the property fosters a mellow atmosphere that's a far cry from your day's daredevil antics. Relax with a treatment on the spa's lake-view deck, followed by an intimate fireside dinner in the library. *From \$492 per person.*