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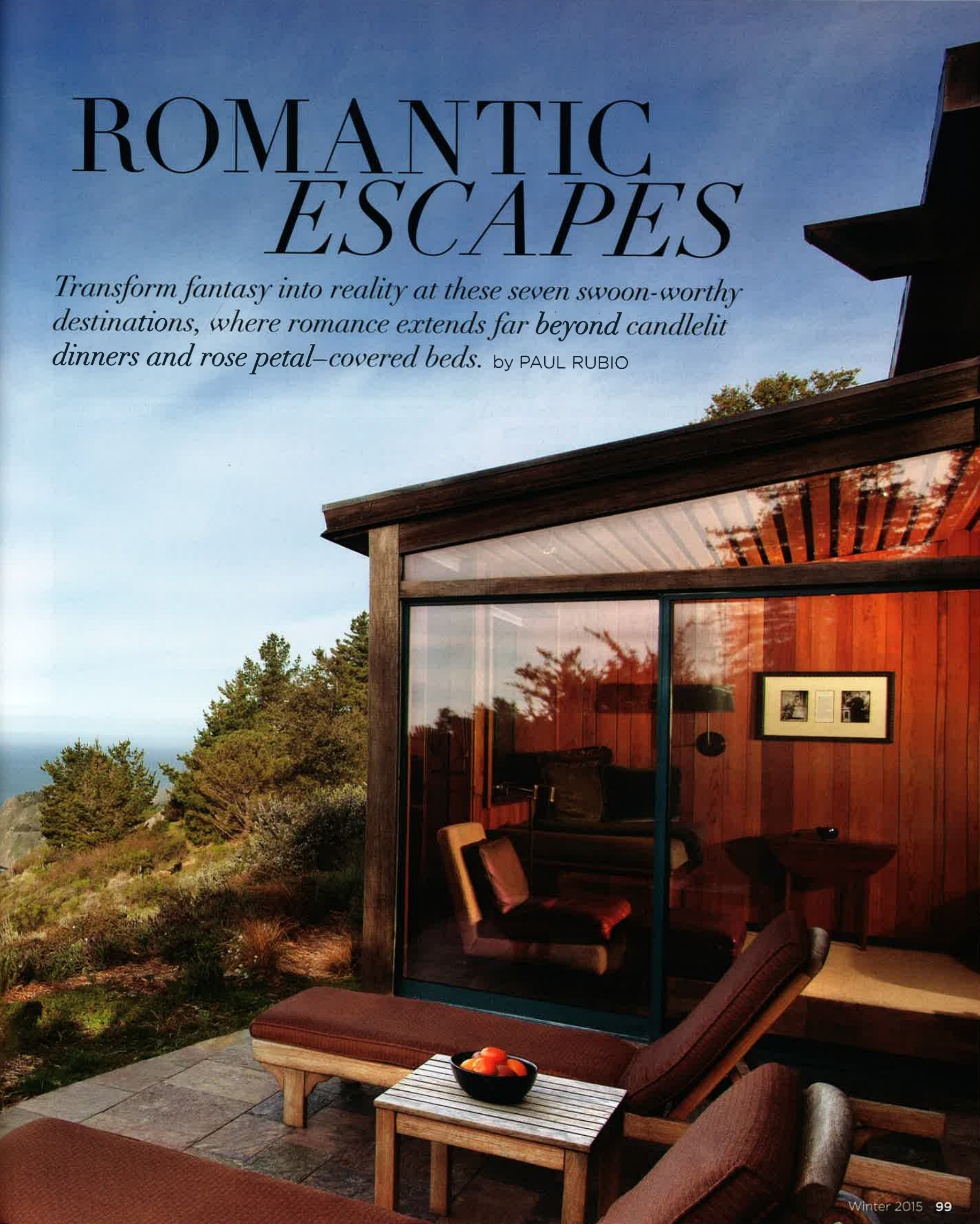
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ROMANTIC *ESCAPES*

Transform fantasy into reality at these seven swoon-worthy destinations, where romance extends far beyond candlelit dinners and rose petal-covered beds. by PAUL RUBIO





FIJI

Strewn across the remote South Pacific—about 10.5 hours from Los Angeles—and enveloped by jewel-toned waters, the Republic of Fiji comprises 333 islands, large and small, graced with lush coconut groves, tropical rainforests, volcanic mountains, pristine beaches, and hospitable locals who've roamed and sailed the archipelago for centuries. While 87 percent of the population resides on the two largest islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, the majority of the islands remain uninhabited and several are minimally developed as private island retreats. It's these far-flung, castaway hideaways that draw travelers from around the world in search of their own storybook stay.

More so than its awe-inspiring island peers like Bora Bora and the Maldives, Fiji is very much a cultural destination. And while Fiji doesn't have the overwater bungalows of its contemporaries, its most exalted resorts play out over several square miles of tropical glory, meaning you'll hardly ever encounter another guest in paradise.

One such sanctuary is **Wakaya Club & Spa** (from \$2,600; wakaya.com), an 11-key resort housed on a lush and serene 2,200-acre islet, accessible by a short 50-minute Cessna flight due east from Fiji's international airport. Wakaya embraces its unfussy Fijian roots; here, it's all about going off the grid and reveling in simplicity. Don't expect televisions, telephones, or technology. The

island lends a different style of entertainment: picnics on private beaches, supreme diving and snorkeling directly offshore in Fiji's only marine reserve, lazing on hammocks amid picture-perfect island scenery, and spending far too much time in your personal, open-air, lava-rock shower.

Another incarnation of Fijian heaven lies on **Laucala Island** (from \$4,600; laucala.com), an over-the-top, 25-villa design opus cast over a 3,500-acre private island, also a 50-minute flight from Nadi but toward the archipelago's more remote northeast reaches. Modeled after traditional Fijian *bures* (pronounced boo-rays), each thatch-roofed villa is in fact an assemblage of dwellings—some enclosed, some open—together creating a private dreamscape of daybeds, outdoor dining areas, verdant gardens, and beautifully appointed sleeping and reflection areas, all centered on a slick, ocean-view swimming pool. A personal house buggy facilitates access to the island's kaleidoscope of natural bounties: white-sand beaches, blue lagoons, coconut-laced shorelines, and rocky interiors, all of which can also be explored by horseback, on foot, or by mountain bike. In the nooks and crannies of this grandeur, you'll stumble upon a sensational spa, five bars and restaurants serving local and international cuisine, a par-72 championship golf course (no tee times necessary), and a "Cultural Village" where guests are privy to traditional ceremonies, rituals, and dances alongside locals from the neighboring island of Qamea.