

Midwest destination weddings

Try a gorgeous getaway with a budget bonus

By KATHERINE RODEGHIER

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Destination weddings have become a popular option as couples look for alternatives to nuptials in metro Chicago.

Combining an exchange of vows with a getaway with family and friends "is one of the hottest trends," said Laura Lukasik, manager of Viking Travel Service in Westmont. Cost is a big factor.

Lukasik said a traditional wedding in the Chicago area averages \$40,000, but a destination wedding can be a fraction of that cost to the bride and groom even in such locales as a Caribbean island. Her service specializes in wedding trips to the Caribbean and Mexico.

But what if the bride's mother is afraid to fly, or the groom can spare only a weekend off work? No problem. Couples can make beautiful wedding memories right in the Midwest.

"Instead of a crazy, busy city wedding, I wanted something a bit low key, a small-town feel," said Amanda Sandrick of Westchester about her nuptials in Galena, Ill. After exchanging vows at a church, the bridal party made its way downtown, posing for pictures amid 19th-century buildings. "It's a charming little town," she said. "People would stop traffic for us."

The Midwest is rife with wedding possibilities for couples. These are within three hours of Chicago:

Wisconsin

"We have a lot of Chicagoans who come up for a destination wedding," said Jenna Check, senior sales manager at the American Club (americanclubresort.com) in Kohler. Two-thirds of couples choose to exchange vows on the Whistling Straits golf course overlooking Lake Michigan. The rustic Irish Barn on the 18th green rents for \$400 with a \$13,000 minimum food and beverage package on Saturdays.

Couples tend to stretch the party over a few days, with the rehearsal dinner becoming a welcome party the night before the ceremony and a brunch for guests the morning after. "It's the whole weekend experience," Check said. Between events, guests need to find something to do. In addition to golf, the resort has the Kohler Wa-



OSTHOFF RESORT PHOTO

The Osthoff Resort in Elkhart Lake, Wis., offers a sandy beach, carriage rides and cooking classes. Weddings with 100 guests start at about \$6,000.



TIBERIUS IMAGES PHOTO

The waterfall at Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park is a major draw.



BAY POINTE INN PHOTO

Weddings at Bay Pointe Inn are often held on the shore of Gun Lake.

ters Spa, trap shooting and horseback riding.

The Osthoff Resort (osthoff.com) in Elkhart Lake, Wis., also offers guests plenty of options. It has a 500-foot sand beach and watercraft rentals, Aspira Spa and L'ecole de la Maison French cooking school. For the wedding, it can arrange a horse-drawn carriage ride and may even throw in a complimentary stay for the newlyweds on their wedding night. Most weddings with 100 guests start around \$6,000.

Illinois

More than half the 120 couples who wed at Starved Rock Lodge (starvedrocklodge.com) near Utica each year are from the Chicago area. "The fact that you don't have to fly anywhere is hugely appealing," said Kathy Casstevens, director of marketing. A basic wedding for 100 guests in the Great Hall runs about

\$6,000 to \$8,000. Couples often rent a trolley to take the wedding party around Starved Rock State Park and into one of its light-dappled canyons for an awesome photo shoot.

Wedding guests at Eagle Ridge Resort & Spa (eagleridge.com) at Galena can stay in lodge rooms or one- to six-bedroom homes scattered around four golf courses, 20 miles of hiking trails and a 225-acre lake, where the resort's hot air balloon floats overhead.

The average wedding on a Friday or Sunday in the off-season might start around \$12,000. A Saturday night wedding in summer might be \$20,000 in the ballroom or \$15,000 on the Point Patio, where sunsets over the lake provide a dramatic backdrop.

Indiana

Couples can have an inexpensive beach wedding without traveling to the

tropics if they say their vows on the sand at the Indiana Dunes (indianadunes.com) at Chesterton. During beach season, a wedding takes place most weekends, said Indiana Dunes State Park property manager Brandt Baughman.

Because the park does not close off the beach for weddings, ceremonies are restricted to 6:30 p.m. or later, when crowds have left. Couples can rent a shelter house seating as many as 80 at picnic benches and either have a meal catered or bring in a picnic. Alcohol is not allowed. The fee for the ceremony is \$50, and shelter houses are \$35 to \$65. Guests can spend the night in one of the dune area's bed-and-breakfasts or chain motels.

After a ceremony in the 1911 Round Barn Theater, guests dig into a family-style dinner or specially prepared buffet served in the old Barn Restaurant at

Amish Acres (amishacres.com) in Nappanee. The 80-acre historic farmstead has two country inns for guests to rest their heads. Weddings range from \$3,000 to \$15,000, depending on size of the guest list and meal and alcohol options.

Michigan

Among the state's most visited cultural attractions, Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park (meijergardens.org), is a hot spot for weddings in Grand Rapids. The most popular location to exchange vows is at a 30-foot waterfall surrounded by sculptures.

"It's a photographer's candy land," said Anne-Marie Smartz, manager of hospitality sales. Often a bride or groom from the Chicago area who attended a local college decides to have the wedding in the gardens because it's more affordable than one at

home. "We hear that all the time," Smartz said. Seated evening ceremonies at the waterfall followed by an indoor reception range from \$5,100 to \$6,100, plus bar and catering at about \$50 to \$60 per guest. Grand Rapids has hotels in a range of prices for overnights.

Chicago-area couples are often among the 80 to 100 who tie the knot each year at the Bay Pointe Inn (baypointeinn.com) in Shelbyville. The Lakefront Pavilion overlooking Gun Lake is the most popular spot for a ceremony and goes for \$5,000 for a Saturday night wedding in June, the most expensive time. Food and beverage packages run \$37 to \$120 per person.

The newest ceremony site is the historic Boat-House Villa, a four-bedroom home with lakefront patio that accommodates weddings of as many as 150 people.

ctc-travel@tribune.com