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TRAVEL



WEDDINGS TO GO

When tying the knot, many couples are saying no to hometown nuptials and yes to a getaway with family and close friends at a destination wedding.

For those who can't afford a traditional wedding, it can be less expensive for the couple, especially when combining a wedding with a honeymoon. Wealthier couples may choose a destination wedding simply to mark the occasion in a dramatic way. Destination weddings also appeal to brides and grooms who moved often in their youth and feel no particular allegiance to one place.



Whatever the reason, a destination wedding is a vacation not only for the couple getting hitched but also for their friends and family. And, like vacations, wedding destinations run the gamut from getaways a few hours away from home to exotic spots half a world away and from simple gatherings to lavish celebrations.

Affordable spots

Couples on a budget look for destinations with less pricey resorts and reached by lower airfares.

Mary Delello, manager of All About Travel in Winter Park, Fla., near Orlando, said a traditional wedding in her area averages \$25,000 to \$30,000, but she has booked destination weddings in the Caribbean for less than \$10,000, including the honeymoon. Young couples with college loans might not have the disposable income for a hometown wedding, she said, so this is a fun and affordable option. Jamaica is one of her most frequently booked locations.

This, of course, means attendees will have to pony up for their trips too. But if they go, the marital couple

can be pretty sure those friends and family really care, provided they can afford it. Also on the plus side, weddings for the couple can be cheaper or free at some all-inclusive resorts, depending on how many of their guests book a stay.

The sky's the limit

"Bora Bora is our No. 1 wedding location," said Shawna Huffman Owen, president of Huffman Travel Ltd. in Chicago, a member of the Virtuoso luxury travel network. "The French Polynesian culture is unique," she said, and the weather is warm, the water clear. Couples especially love overwater bungalows. "I don't think you can do better than the Four Seasons" (fourseasons.com / borabora.com), which is expanding the number of overwater bungalows with private pools, she said.

Staying within the United States, Owen said, ranch weddings are hot. Resort ranches, such as Brush Creek (brushcreekranch.com) in Wyoming or the Ranch at Rock Creek (theranchatrockcreek.com) in Montana, where actors Kate Bosworth and Michael Polish were mar-

ried, can be quite luxurious. The bride might ride on horseback to an isolated rock where the vows are exchanged, she explained. "Oftentimes, the wedding party is in cowboy boots."

As with any wedding, the many variables — flowers, music, food — make it difficult to generalize costs. A wedding on Bora Bora might start around \$3,000 per guest in the offseason, Owen said, excluding airfare. A three-day wedding at a resort ranch might begin around \$2,000 per guest and head to the stratosphere.

Also in the exotic vein, New Zealand attracts couples because it is so pristine and its scenery so dramatic, according to Ian Swain of Swain Destinations in Ardmore, Pa. There is also adventure. Couples can take a helicopter to the top of a peak in the Southern Alps to exchange vows or choose to tie the knot bungee jumping or dangling from a parachute. "The sky's the limit, literally, to what you can do," he said.

For something more sedate, Cape Kidnappers Golf Course, perched on cliffs above the ocean, "is a beautiful place for a wed-

ding on one of the greens," Swain said. The Farm at Cape Kidnappers (capekidnappers.com) rates five stars. Then again, New Zealand is a 12-hour flight from the U.S. West Coast.

Easy access

When choosing a wedding destination — luxury or budget — couples should consider how easy it is for guests to get there. Perhaps grandma can't handle a long flight or a favorite uncle doesn't want to get a passport.

"A successful destination wedding has accessibility from different parts of the country," Delello said. Jamaica, for example,

has nonstop flights from Orlando and much of the East Coast, she said. Also, a wedding she booked at Beaches Turks & Caicos (beaches.com) had guests flying in from Minneapolis, Chicago and New York. Some guests had one stop, but access still was easy.

Jamaica and Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula are relatively short flights, as is Puerto Rico, a hot wedding destination with luxury properties, according to Owen. In the past "people traveled through and didn't stop" in Puerto Rico, she said, but now several resorts are giving couples reason to consider a wedding there.

Because it's a U.S. terri-

tory, passports aren't required to enter Puerto Rico, nor are they needed in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where the luxury Caneel Bay Resort (caneelbay.com) caters to wedding parties. Maui, in the 50th state, requires no passport, but the flight is long.

On the mainland, there's easy access to Scottsdale, Ariz., with more than 40 off-property wedding venues and more than 75 hotels and resorts. Promise Rock, a 12-million-year-old boulder at The Boulders Resort (theboulders.com), is a popular spot to exchange vows amid the flora and fauna in the foothills of the Sonoran Desert.

Other hot spots to consider, according to travel agents, are Mexico and Las Vegas, which are heavyweights on the destination-wedding circuit. In Mexico, where nuptials can be a fraction of the price compared with hometown ceremonies, Cancun and the Riviera Maya lead the way.

And, of course, in Las Vegas, the party is ready-made. In addition to kitschy wedding chapels, couples find many memorable settings at Vegas resorts. There's the Mirage with its exploding volcano, Paris Las Vegas with its Eiffel Tower and the Wynn with an indoor waterfall.

All in all, not a bad way for couples to start down that hopefully long road together.

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