

BRIDAL GUIDE

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Your Dream Destination Wedding

Everything you need to know about planning a wedding away from home—and some tips about how to throw a welcome-home bash.

By: Denise Schipani

Call it a weddingmoon, call it a destination wedding, call it whatever you like: These days, many brides and grooms are deciding to ditch the hometown reception and jet off to say “I do” someplace...different. Sound appealing to you? Here’s how to plan your faraway dream destination wedding.

Why Have a Destination Wedding?

Well, we’re tempted to say, “why not?” Planning a wedding away from home is attractive to different couples for different reasons. Here are just a few:

You’ve always imagined your nuptials in a certain vacation spot. Maybe you spent an idyllic vacation earlier in your relationship at a gorgeous Caribbean resort or a laid-back Key West hotel. Or maybe one of you spent summer holidays at a quaint New England inn or a rustic Montana ranch. If it’s easy to craft a picture of yourselves in wedding duds onto those wonderful holiday memories, a destination wedding may be just the ticket for you.

Your families and friends are from here, there and everywhere. Many couples with far-flung families have thrown up their hands in despair at trying to find a spot that suits everyone. Soon it occurs to them: If everyone’s going to have to travel anyway... Voilà, destination wedding.

You’re not into traditional hotel/reception hall weddings. You’ve been there, done that (you know who you are—you’ve attended a wedding approximately 40 out of the last 52 weekends). All of these kinds of options are leaving you cold. But someplace warm? Ah, now that’s a different story.

You want to make the planning easier (yes, easier). It’s true that any wedding—whether it’s at home or far away—can morph into a logistical nightmare. But because many resorts and hotels



have on-site wedding coordinators that do all the legwork for you, a destination wedding can be less stressful to plan.

You want to streamline costs (or even, in some cases, save money). No one can definitively say that a destination wedding costs less than an at-home reception. But no one can say it costs more, either. However, it often turns out to be easier to keep costs in check for an exotic destination wedding. Two reasons: One, you're likely to have a smaller guest list (the biggest way to save \$\$ on your wedding is to keep the list lean); and two, your choices are less copious than they might be at home. When you're planning from afar, it all seems exotic and wonderful, so you're more likely to be happy with the simple clutch of local flowers the hotel provides, whereas at home you'd be visiting a half-dozen florists and being tempted by a more lavish (and expensive) bouquet and centerpieces.

Let's Get Practical- The Destination Wedding How To

Ah, it all sounds so delightfully dreamy. But a destination wedding (whether it be in Alaska or Tahiti) still requires wedding planning, in the everyday practical sense, same as any wedding. Here are three points you simply must consider:

- 1. Start early.** You may think you have all the time in the world, but when you start investigating your first-choice locale, you may discover it's a lot pricier than you thought, or getting there is too complicated for you and your guests. And speaking of guests, they need lots of time, too. While six to eight weeks ahead is fine for sending invites to a traditional wedding, you'll need to give four months notice—minimum—to guests invited to a wedding away.
- 2. Stick to your budget.** While it's true that it's easier to keep costs in check with destination weddings (it's that all-inclusive thing), it's still wise to keep an upper limit firmly in mind. That way, if you happen to start tooling around online and see the ever so slightly ritzier resort just a few steps down the beach from the first place you loved, you're less inclined to spend more.
- 3. Be communicative.** Send out save-the-date cards as soon as you know when and where you'll wed. Consider setting up a wedding website to keep guests apprised of details. Let them know when you've set aside blocks of hotel rooms and how to book them, what to pack, what the itinerary of the event will be and so on. (Caveat: Keeping guests up to date is not the same thing as boring everyone to tears with details about the search for the perfect strappy sandal. Only give them the info they need.)

Caring for Your Guests

You are set to have the time of your life. But your guests? Let's face it: If you hadn't invited them to your wedding, they may not have chosen to visit this particular spot. So be sure to include warm and welcoming touches (and plenty of fun aside from the wedding) to keep guests happy.

Put together welcome baskets. This is a simple to do and well received by travel-weary guests. Offer things like a map and a list of local attractions, an itinerary for wedding-related activities, bottles of water and snacks for the room. And toss in fun stuff—flip-flops for your beach wedding, a one-time-use camera, a spa gift certificate if you can swing the cost.

Investigate activity options to please a wide range of ages and proclivities. If your locale is great for hiking, kayaking or windsurfing, arrange a group activity for the day before or after the

wedding. For those who may not want to take part, arrange a sightseeing tour.

Figure out if anyone will need special help, and take care of it. Does your grandmother need a wheelchair or your sister a crib for her baby? Arrange these things with the hotel in advance. If there will be children, check with the resort about babysitting services.

Make reserving a no-brainer, and pay for whatever your budget allows (such as breakfasts, a post-wedding brunch, a group activity). Generally accepted etiquette says that guests, including the bridal party, pay for their own lodgings, but do find out if your hotel is willing to offer a discount for groups (many do). Arrange a welcome cocktail party or a light supper, as well as breakfast or brunch the day after the wedding.

Where to Go...And How to Book

If you already know the resort where you want to wed, then you're ahead of the game. Simply call them or visit their website and find out if they have a wedding coordinator and what you need to do next. If you're less sure about your wedding destination (or know the overall location—Mexico, Jamaica, Hawaii, the Caribbean—but not the specific spot), work with a travel agent, or check out these one-stop-shopping destination wedding sites. These are free for you:

The Wedding Experience (theweddingexperience.com ^[1]): This site specializes in cruises (though you can book trips that visit a wide variety of destinations).

Destination Weddings (destinationweddings.com ^[2]): The site lists a large number of destinations around the world and offers the practical advice you'll need.

Island Brides (islandbrides.com ^[3]): This one focuses on Caribbean beach weddings.

Welcome Home!

Here's a destination-wedding conundrum: Had you planned a "regular" wedding, you may have invited upward of 100 guests. Instead, you chose to fly off to an exotic destination wedding to get married and only invited, say, 30 of your absolute nearest and dearest. Of that 30, only 15 are able to swing the trip. It'll be fabulous, to be sure, but what about all those others you would have invited? Wouldn't it be nice to let them share in the fun, too?

Many couples solve the problem by planning a welcome-home party. Think of it as an introduction party, says Barbara Clark, wedding consultant and owner of An Elegant Affair in Raleigh, North Carolina. Traditionally, a family member hosts a party like this for you, though many couples arrange it themselves. Some tips:

Timing: You should try to throw this party within three months of your wedding. Start planning it, and send your invitations as soon as you know when and where you'll wed—both to make it easier for you and to let guests know they'll still have a chance to celebrate with you even if they aren't attending the destination wedding.

Style: As with any wedding, it's up to you. Some brides may want to wear a wedding dress, but strict etiquette frowns on this. Instead, dress in a manner appropriate to the tone of the party (the season, indoor or outdoor, day or night, etc.).

Invitation wording: You might want to say something like this: "You are cordially invited to a

reception to celebrate the recent marriage of (your names).”

Gifts: If you’re registering before your destination wedding, your welcome-home guests are free to bring a gift, but “it’s not appropriate to expect people to bring a gift,” says Clark.

Cakes and toasts: Strict etiquette says no wedding cake. But if your guest list isn’t full of Miss Manners types, go ahead and get yourself a nice confection.

Guest list: Should you also invite the same folks that came to your destination wedding? Sure, says Clark. Certainly, you’re not going to dis-invite your parents, siblings and best pals who made the trip!

Nice touches: If you can, show a DVD of your destination wedding or a slideshow of wedding pics. Set up the showing on the side or in a different room, so guests can wander in and watch it at their leisure.

We did it!

Kate and John Armstrong

Wedding: August 4, 2007, Hawaii

Reception: August 16, 2007, Washington, D.C.

When Kate and John got engaged, they lived and worked in Washington D.C. Sure, they had friends in the capital, but their families? All over. (She’s from Arkansas, he’s from Alabama.) John, having been stationed in Hawaii in the Army, wanted to honeymoon there. Kate, having been a bridesmaid a stunning 13 times (including, once, in a Goth wedding), wanted to keep her own nuptials simple and intimate.

“We had been imagining ourselves getting married on a beach. So, Hawaii it was,” says Kate. The couple found a villa to rent, and did all the planning on their own, tracking down an officiant, videographer, photographer and someone to do Kate’s hair and makeup. That lineup of pros also served as their witnesses.

But Kate and John still wanted to celebrate with their nearest and dearest—about 85 people in all. While planning the Hawaii nuptials, they also began a search for a venue back home in D.C. for a post-honeymoon party. There was another twist: They planned to show a DVD of the Hawaiian wedding at the event, so the post-party spot had to be suitable for a film screening.

Kate had a brainstorm: a theater! A small, independent one proved perfect. “We had wedding photos blown up into movie posters,” she says. “And we decorated with leis.” A local Chinese restaurant catered coconut shrimp and skewered pork. Dessert included cupcakes with sugar hibiscus flowers (And, of course, popcorn for those who can’t watch a movie without munching!). The party was a huge success. “Seeing the movie on a big screen made people feel they’d been there,” says Kate. “It was so huge, you could see the tears on my cheeks and John’s hands shaking. You could even hear the waves.”

Destination Weddings

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Links:

[1] <http://www.theweddingexperience.com/>

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