

Chapter 1

Destination Weddings 101

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding what a destination wedding is (and what it isn't)
- ▶ Making sure your marriage is legal — wherever you wed
- ▶ Discovering the most popular places for destination weddings
- ▶ Finding answers to your destination wedding FAQs
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Every marriage begins with a unique love story. If yours also includes a taste for travel, a passion for adventure, and the commitment to celebrate in your own way, yours can lead to extraordinary places in your journey to marry at a destination wedding.

Today, as many as one in four engaged couples has a destination wedding. Do you and your fiancé envision yourselves as one of those couples? If so, this chapter can help you begin, serving as your jumping-off point into the world of destination weddings — what they mean, whether a wedding away is right for you, and how to plan one as the next chapter in your love story.

Defining Destination Weddings and Why They're So Popular

A *destination wedding* is a wedding ceremony and celebration held in a location away from where the bride or groom live. Basically it's your wedding, your way . . . just away. Because a destination wedding always involves travel, more time is allotted for the occasion, and the wedding becomes a multiday event.

Laid-back beach hotels, mountaintop ski resorts, lush vineyards, glitzy casino hotels, full-service cruise ships, exotic islands, and European castles and villas are among the top venues couples choose because the “destination” part of the equation is as important as the “wedding” one.



You may hear a destination wedding referred to as a *wedding away* or a *weddingmoon*. Although most couples do segue from their destination wedding right into the honeymoon, it's not necessarily part of the overall plan. Whether you take your honeymoon before, immediately after, or sometime in the future, Chapter 18 discusses the advantage of each choice and having the honeymoon you want.

This section gives you a quick overview of destination weddings, including the main advantages of weddings away and why they're becoming the fastest-growing segment of the bridal industry. Chapter 2 helps you determine whether one is right for you.

Simplifying your wedding

Destination weddings allow you, the couple, to make your own rules. At hometown weddings, the reception always follows the ceremony. And a young bride and groom who are heavily influenced by their parents' taste and budget may be pressured into having a more traditional or complex wedding than they really want.

When more-independent couples wed, they're likely to make choices that are personally important to them, rather than following what others say they "should" have or "should" do at their wedding. Overall, destination weddings tend to be modest and casual. The emphasis is on relaxation and shared experiences. Your ceremony could be followed by guests mounting waiting horses to take off on a trail ride, or boarding a catamaran for an afternoon of snorkeling. And in place of a stuffy, old-fashioned reception, you can have a beach barbecue capped by fireworks.

The fun, ease, convenience, and simplicity of a wedding away are especially appealing to certain types of couples, especially more-mature ones. They may have busy careers but a fondness for travel. Perhaps one or both of them are getting married for the second or third time, and they want to do something in a completely different way from an earlier wedding. Or they may not have the time, taste, or funds for a big, complicated affair.

Paying the price

The expense of a hometown wedding is a strong incentive to make couples scan the horizon for a cheaper place to tie the knot. On average, weddings away cost about 40 percent less than traditional at-home weddings. The price of a nice ceremony in the Caribbean or Mexico rarely exceeds \$10,000 — and many come in at half that amount or less.

The rationale for my wedding away

When I was planning to get married, I interviewed several people in the wedding industry in New York City. At one hotel, the banquet manager painted this picture:

“Imagine yourself gliding down our 60-foot aisle wearing a long satin gown and train dotted with rhinestones. Everyone you know (we can fit 400 in our space!) is gazing up at you. In one corner of the room, a string quartet serenades you with a work by Beethoven, and the entire space is decorated to resemble a winter palace, complete with faux hanging icicles.”

Knowing I’d feel dressed for Halloween in that fashion, hating the idea that people would be staring at me, loathing classical music, and imagining that the budget for an event decorated that way would approximate the Gross National Product of a small country, I gulped, ran home as fast as I could, and said, “Honey, we’re going to Vegas. . .”

The average American wedding now runs \$27,852, according to a recent *Condé Nast Bridal Group* study. And with wedding costs rising about 8 percent annually, by 2010 the average wedding tab is likely to approach \$35,000. In urban areas that include New York City; Washington, D.C.; and Los Angeles, that’s already the price tag for a modest affair.

How much sense does it make to spend money on a wedding that you could otherwise use to buy a new car, put a down payment on a house, or take the honeymoon trip of a lifetime? That’s something you have to decide for yourselves — although many destination wedding couples already know they would rather put the cash in their pockets than in a conventional wedding’s coffers.

Choosing quality over quantity

Transporting friends and family to a dream destination to see you marry can feel like stepping into a fairytale or an adventure film. Lifting people out of their everyday lives and bringing them to a place that’s beautiful and exciting has a magical quality to it — a definite destination wedding appeal.

Weddings away are also popular because you get to invite only the people you truly want to come. Because not everyone can afford to travel, guest lists are smaller than those of hometown weddings. Fewer guests means a more intimate event in an ideal setting to reunite with those who mean the most to you. (You can find advice on who to invite in Chapter 12.)



The size of a guest list for a destination wedding can range from zero into the hundreds, but most lists usually don't exceed 100. A typical wedding away involves just 15 to 20 guests, although that number is expanding as more and more couples get wise to the advantages of affordable out-of-town weddings.

Although couples can ease their financial burden by having a destination wedding, guests don't get off as easily. Their costs of transportation, lodging, and food and activities not covered by the hosts can easily top \$1,000 over the course of a long weekend (not to mention a wedding gift). Attendants who are asked to wear special dresses and accessories or rent tuxedos have to shell out even more. Fortunately, the prospect of combining a vacation with a celebration in a wonderful place helps most guests and wedding-party members justify the expense.



When it comes down to it, though, all it takes is two to marry — plus an officiant and witnesses, as required. So if you don't care to have guests at all, that's your prerogative. Plenty of couples who don't want any fuss build a wedding into a vacation and comfortably marry without fanfare.

The Differences between Getting Married Away and at Home

Being aware of the differences between a destination wedding and an at-home wedding can make it easier to decide which is right for you. Chapter 2 goes into detail, but you need to know the following essential points if you're considering a destination wedding:

- ✓ **Location, location, location:** Destination weddings involve overnight travel to another place, often selected for its scenic appeal. If the setting is particularly beautiful, the wedding couple may be able to save money on certain aspects of the wedding, such as flowers and decorations.
- ✓ **More time to celebrate:** A conventional hometown wedding lasts between three and five hours, longer if you have a break between the ceremony and reception. In general, a destination wedding takes place over three days or more.
- ✓ **Lower cost:** Despite the longer amount of time involved, destination weddings are usually cheaper than at-home ones. Find out about budgeting in Chapter 4 and see the "Paying the price" section earlier in this chapter for more info.

Understanding how eloping differs from a destination wedding

In the past, marrying away from home was synonymous with eloping. That was usually the only option for young couples who needed parental consent for marriage but couldn't obtain it. They'd quietly leave home — often concealed under the cover of night's darkness — bound for a place where the legal age for marriage was lower, and no one would appear to challenge their intent to wed. (Read about Gretna Green, Scotland — a refuge for lovers for centuries — in Chapter 9.)

When couples of legal age eloped, they often did so to avoid familial conflict over differences in color or creed. Sometimes, though, couples simply eloped because it was fast, easy, private, and cheap.

Today the definition of *eloping* refers to any couple who secretly heads off to another place to marry. Sometimes the decision is impromptu, but other times, their intentions are planned far in advance. Either way, guests are rarely involved and vows typically aren't followed by a reception. The couple either continues on to a honeymoon or returns to their normal lives right away, announcing the marriage at a time when they see fit.

- ✔ **Casual versus traditional celebration:** Hometown weddings are normally traditional affairs, sometimes stodgy and often predictable due to formulaic agendas. At a destination wedding, you can toss out conventions you don't like and make the event as laid back or as formal as you like. Most couples opt for casual ease.
- ✔ **Making your own rules:** Beyond the necessity of obtaining a wedding license and being married by a licensed officiant, destination weddings don't have any hard-and-fast rules. For example, you know that one about the groom not seeing the bride in her dress before the wedding? At a destination wedding, the couple may have checked into their room a couple of days before the event — and he's the one to zip up her dress and tell her she looks beautiful before they head off together to say their vows at an oceanside gazebo.
- ✔ **Say good-bye to the home team:** Because a destination wedding usually takes place a significant distance from home, anyone you can't do without — from your pastor to your pedicurist — you have to invite to the wedding and pay for their time, travel, and services. Otherwise, expect to use a local officiant and vendors. (For more on gathering your destination wedding team, see Chapter 5.)

Making Your Wedding Legal: What You Need to Know

In order to become legally married, you need to apply for and obtain a marriage license and have your vows formalized by an authorized officiant within a designated time period. When you're getting married in a location other than your hometown, you must follow its laws to ensure that your marriage there is legal. This section briefly looks at various locations within the United States and elsewhere to help you be aware of laws in different destinations.

Marrying in the United States

Marriage license laws and requirements differ from state to state and locality to locality in the United States. All have a minimum age requirement, but that varies as well. If you're getting married in the U.S., prepare ahead of time by finding out what the laws and requirements are where you intend to marry. To do so, contact the town or county clerk in your chosen destination and ask how to apply for a license.



Different U.S. states permit a wide range of officiants to perform civil and religious ceremonies. Find a state-by-state list at marriage.about.com/cs/marriagelicense/a/officiants.htm. To have a religious ceremony in a U.S. church, synagogue, mosque, or other house of worship, contact the local cleric for information.

Getting hitched in another country

A legal overseas marriage license is also legal in the United States, as long as it doesn't break any state laws. Exceptions include same-sex marriages, which are legal in Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands, South Africa, and Spain, but not in the United States. Only in Massachusetts can same-sex residents legally marry.

For all couples, countries outside the U.S. have strict guidelines before issuing a license. These can include residency requirements and the expense of translating relevant documents into the country's official language. To find out more about the legality of an overseas wedding, check out Chapter 6. You can also find the official link to marriage license information for all the locales mentioned in this book in Chapters 7, 8, and 9.

To avoid delay and complications when marrying abroad, many couples opt to first have a private civil ceremony where they live.

The event that takes place during the destination wedding then becomes a symbolic ceremony. You can read more about these in Chapter 6.

If you want to have a religious ceremony abroad, set the wheels in motion by requesting a meeting with your rabbi, minister, or parish priest. He can put you in touch with regional headquarters, which can help you contact overseas prelates.



Don't allow yourselves to fall in love with the idea of marrying in a foreign church simply because its stained-glass windows are amazing or the architecture is majestic. Some churches and synagogues don't accommodate the wishes of couples who aren't long-standing congregation members.

Looking at the Most Popular Locations

When a particular destination is favored by a large number of couples, you can usually find a good reason for it. (Convenience and ease of travel are major ones; that's why, according to statistics, two-thirds of couples choose the United States.)

Part II helps you explore all the best places for a destination wedding in depth. However, if you can't wait to find out what they are, here are the top spots, year after year:

- ✔ **Las Vegas:** Vegas weddings are fast, fun, and can be very affordable (as long as you don't blow your stash at the casinos or opt for an over-the-top affair). And nowhere else does a marriage license bureau stay open until midnight every day. Chapter 7 helps you plan a Vegas ceremony where the odds are in your favor.
- ✔ **Hawaii:** Heavenly beaches and resorts dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure make these islands (especially Maui) a popular choice. Explore them in Chapter 7.
- ✔ **Disneyland and Disney World:** Having recently introduced opulent couture weddings, Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings keep spreading pixie dust on loving couples. For more, see Chapter 7.
- ✔ **The Caribbean and Mexico:** Quintessential beach getaways, the islands of the Caribbean, the coasts of Mexico — and the all-inclusive resorts they harbor — have perfected the art of providing couples with *turnkey* weddings (where all the elements are bundled together for your convenience). Dig up the details in Chapter 8.

- ✓ **Canada:** As charming as France in the east and as scenic as the Alps in the west, Canada speaks your language. With an advantageous exchange rate and legal same-sex marriages, Canada provides ample reasons to head north of the border. Find out more in Chapter 7.
- ✓ **Fiji:** This bit of heaven on earth is a long way to go to get married (and paradise doesn't come cheap), but that doesn't discourage couples who want an uncommon ceremony in a lush setting. Refer to Chapter 8.
- ✓ **Europe:** History, romance, scenic beauty, and sophisticated culture draw couples here. Complex marriage requirements erect obstacles in some countries such as France, although others, like Scotland, are more welcoming. See Chapter 9 for specifics.
- ✓ **Cruise ships:** The price is right, and so is the strategy: Marry in port, and then sail off on your honeymoon. You can discover the ceremony, reception, and sail-away options offered by different cruise lines in Chapter 10.

Answering Some Questions You May Have

If you're seriously considering a destination wedding, you already may have dozens of questions in mind. This book can answer many of them and help make your destination wedding a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The following addresses some of the bigger-picture questions you may be wondering about:

- ✓ **With so many amazing places to choose from, how do we decide where to have the wedding?** The short answer is to find a place that's in some way meaningful to the two of you. Chapter 6 can help you blue-sky the possibilities, and the rest of Part II offers specific recommendations.
- ✓ **How long should we wait to book the wedding?** The sooner, the better. If you have your hearts set on Santorini in Greece, you may have to wait two years or longer to nail down a date at a preferred place. Saturday nights everywhere book up fastest. But you can always get married tomorrow in Las Vegas.
- ✓ **Is it wrong to e-mail save-the-dates?** If everyone on your guest list has e-mail and checks it regularly, go ahead, but that means forgoing tangible ones that provide a lasting remembrance. See Chapter 12 for more info on save-the-dates.

- ✔ **How do we handle friends and family with kids if we want to keep the wedding adults-only? And what do we tell people who expect to be invited — but aren't?** One of the advantages of destination weddings is that people expect them to be smaller than at-home ones, so they usually understand. Read about who to invite and who to leave at home in Chapter 12 — and how to communicate those decisions gracefully in Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Which last name should be on the bride's first passport: maiden or married?** You can't legally change your name until after you're married (unless you go to court to do so beforehand). To avoid confusion, I advise you to keep all ID and travel documents in the same name until you return. Find out how to get a passport in Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Is it tacky to get married in Las Vegas?** At the AAA Five-Diamond Award-winning Bellagio hotel, wedding packages range in price from \$1,500 to \$15,000. They're definitely not tacky, nor are chapels inside Las Vegas's other top casino hotels. Discover the real deal on Vegas weddings in Chapter 7.
- ✔ **Do we need a wedding planner?** If you're having a small wedding at a hotel or chapel that provides its own wedding coordinator, absolutely not. However, bigger events and ones in more-remote locations where weddings aren't an everyday occurrence require local assistance. See Chapter 5 on assembling your wedding team.
- ✔ **How important is visiting the destination before the wedding?** Checking out your location prior to the festivities can help set your mind at ease. But as long as you have someone in the location working on the wedding on your behalf, you plan to get there ahead of time, and you're not a control freak, visiting isn't essential. Again, the bigger the wedding, the more advance planning is required, which argues in favor of having your feet on the ground well before your event.
- ✔ **How long do we have to entertain wedding guests after the ceremony?** Typically, the reception follows the ceremony and then a farewell brunch takes place on the last official day of the wedding. After that, they're on their own (and so are the two of you!). Chapter 15 offers tips on entertaining guests throughout their stay.
- ✔ **Who pays for what?** Couples usually pay for their own destination weddings, sometimes with assistance from family. Guests pick up the tab for their travel and lodging. Chapter 4 is dedicated to budgeting, so you can find more answers to financial questions there.

Seeing stars: Celebrity destination weddings

Nearly ten years ago model Cindy Crawford and nightclub impresario Rande Gerber had a barefoot wedding at a beach resort in the Bahamas. She wore a short white gown, and he stood up in a white shirt and Armani pants. Photographs of their happy day attended by a few close friends and family members circulated around the world, inspiring thousands of other couples to choose an easy, breezy destination wedding for themselves.

Crawford and Gerber weren't the first stars to get married away, and they certainly won't be the last. But they're in good company. The following couples also said their vows far from home:

- ✓ Ashley Judd and Dario Franchetti: Skibo Castle, Scotland
- ✓ Avril Lavigne and Deryck Whibley: Montecito, California
- ✓ Ben Affleck and Jennifer Garner: Parrot Cay Resort, Turks & Caicos
- ✓ Bill Gates and Melinda French: Four Seasons Lanai, Hawaii
- ✓ Brett Hull and Darcie Schollmeyer: Esperanza Resort, Los Cabos, Mexico
- ✓ Christiane Amanpour and Jamie Rubin: Odescalchi Castle, Bracciano, Italy
- ✓ Christina Aguilera and Jordan Bratman: Staglin Family Vineyards, Napa Valley, California
- ✓ Duke and Duchess of Windsor: Château de Candé, Loire Valley, France
- ✓ Eva Longoria and Tony Parker: Paris, France
- ✓ Gwen Stefani and Gavin Rossdale: St. Paul's Church, Covent Garden, England
- ✓ Heidi Klum and Seal: Puerto Vallarta, Mexico
- ✓ John Lennon and Yoko Ono: Gibraltar
- ✓ Liv Tyler and Royston Langdon: private villa, Barbados
- ✓ Madonna and Guy Ritchie: Skibo Castle, Scotland
- ✓ Pink and Carey Hart: Costa Rica
- ✓ Tiger Woods and Elin Nordegren: Sandy Lane Resort, Barbados
- ✓ Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes: Odescalchi Castle, Bracciano, Italy
- ✓ Tori Spelling and Dean McDermott: Wakaya Island Resort, Fiji
- ✓ Reba McEntire and Narbel Blackstock: Lake Tahoe, Nevada
- ✓ Sarah Michelle Gellar and Freddie Prinze Jr.: Jalisco, Mexico
- ✓ Sylvester Stallone and Jennifer Flavin: Oxfordshire, England

Las Vegas chapels attract more celebrities and civilians than anywhere else. Although not all star weddings have stood the test of time, they certainly seemed like a good idea at the moment. Vegas wedding alumni include:

- ✓ Angelina Jolie and Billy Bob Thornton (divorced)
- ✓ Britney Spears and Jason Alexander (annulled after 55 hours)
- ✓ Demi Moore and Bruce Willis (divorced)
- ✓ Elvis Presley and Priscilla Beaulieu
- ✓ Jon Bon Jovi and Dorothea Hurley
- ✓ Kelly Ripa and Mark Consuelos
- ✓ Natalie Maines and Adrian Pasdar
- ✓ Paul Newman and Joann Woodward (50 years and still going strong).

- ✓ **How can we transport a wedding gown without it getting completely wrinkled?** Tissue paper, tissue paper, and more tissue paper. Turn to Chapter 14, devoted to wedding wear, for tips from the pros and selecting a dress that travels well.
- ✓ **Can the groom still wear shorts if the bride wants to wear a long gown?** Yes — if he's man enough to bear the scorn and ridicule of his yet-unborn children when they're old enough to view mom and dad's wedding pictures. For specific advice on what guys can wear, head for Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Does the captain marry couples on a cruise ship?** Only captains of Princess ships are permitted to do so. On other cruise lines, couples are married by a regular officiant when the ship is in port. Chapter 10 goes into detail on cruise weddings.
- ✓ **Will we feel as if we've missed out on something if we don't get married at home?** If you define *home* as the place where the most important people in the world are, then anywhere you bring them together will feel like home. Lots of couples also plan at-home receptions afterwards. Get ideas for those in Chapter 17, plus ways to include guests who couldn't attend.

Getting Going: 20 Steps to a Destination Wedding

Even the simplest destination weddings require a degree of planning. If you follow a logical order in doing things, you can feel less stressed, work more efficiently, and accomplish all the necessary

tasks on schedule. How much time do you need to set everything up? That depends entirely on you and how complex the wedding you have in mind is.

Breaking down the process to 20 steps, these are the major milestones:

- 1. Decide that a destination wedding is right for you.**
- 2. Choose possible dates.**
- 3. Consider where to go.**
- 4. Select a destination.**
- 5. Draw up a guest list.**
- 6. Pick a place to wed and a place to stay.**
- 7. Alert friends and family.**
- 8. Make travel arrangements.**
- 9. Decide whether or not you need to hire a planner.**
- 10. Shop for wedding wear.**
- 11. Focus on the type of ceremony you want and the spot.**
- 12. Decide on the type of reception you want.**
- 13. Pick a reception location, caterer, and menu.**
- 14. Select flowers, decorations, and music.**
- 15. Opt for photography, videography, and/or a Web cast.**
- 16. Arrange all group activities for the wedding weekend.**
- 17. Pack all the necessities (from wedding attire to important documents); you can ship remaining items, such as guest welcome bags, to your location.**
- 18. Arrive early to check on the details.**
- 19. Savor every moment of the occasion.**
- 20. Continue onto the honeymoon or head directly home to start the next chapter of your life together.**

Fortunately, I've detailed every one of these steps in this book, so you needn't feel overwhelmed. (And if I, a destination bride whose party-organization skills previously were limited to throwing my dirty clothes in the closet and opening up a jumbo bag of M&Ms before guests arrived could pull off an event of this magnitude, so can you.) By referring to this book's table of contents, you can find what you need to know, when you need to know it, and how to make it all work for you.