

Crafting Your Destination Wedding

Some travel trends come and go, but destination weddings have steadily increased in popularity over the last several years. And why not? Imaginative brides have expanded the concept to create multi-day celebrations in beautiful locations where everyone gets to have fun. At some point during this mini-vacation, a memorable marriage ceremony takes place.

My young friend Kirsten Koe summarized the sentiments of all the brides with whom I spoke when she said, "Destination weddings are small and special — a gathering of the closest family and friends."

Kirsten and her fiancé Peter Coutant chose the Turks and Caicos in the Caribbean after searching for a place with easy access from their home in Chicago. "We wanted convenient air connections so our guests could have the maximum amount

of time relaxing, not sitting around airports. Another plus for this destination was that we could be legally married. Some countries only allow symbolic marriages."

The couple picked the Gansevoort Turks and Caicos Resort after studying the property's Web site and cross-referencing it with the reviews on Yelp and TripAdvisor. They liked the "gorgeous" beach and the fact that the resort was large enough to provide a variety of settings for various events. Only the welcome reception took place off property at a nearby "super cute" beachfront restaurant.

All 23 guests were treated to three nights at the hotel, which sounds pricey for the parents, but this savvy bride chose the last week of "off season" when room rates were half price and the hotel was willing to include complimentary breakfasts.

(www.gansevoortturksandcaicos.com)

Kirsten and Peter thoughtfully greeted each new arrival with a beach bag containing, among other things, a game to play on the sand and a pair of colorful Havaiana flip flops — carefully chosen to reflect the personality of that guest.



The Cragos' wedding in Maui

The ceremony took place on the beach at sunset, with the bride and her attendants carrying bouquets of native white bougainvillea. A cocktail reception was followed by dinner poolside and an after-party in the resort's award-winning oceanfront penthouse.

Another couple, my La Jolla neighbor Kirstin Kirn and her fiancé Michael Crago, chose Maui for their destination wedding. In this case, they went to the island six months before the big day and reserved a stunning oceanview home, which became "wedding central."

"Majestic Maui" near Lahaina has four bedrooms, a lagoon swimming pool, a 12-person hot tub, outdoor shower, gas fire pit, and spacious lanai surrounded by



What better way to start married life than barefoot on the beach? The Coutants' wedding in Turks and Caicos

an expansive lawn. The house sleeps eight, and the remaining 20+ guests stayed in nearby hotels. (www.vrbo.com/132132)

Kirstin's brother applied for a one-day officiant's license so that he could do the honors at the wedding. Celebrations Catering, owned by well-known cookbook author Beverly Gannon, created a fabulous dinner following the ceremony including Hawaiian pupus, grilled local fish, and Kirstin's choice of desserts: an ice cream sundae bar and brownies.

Following a morning-after brunch at Plantation House Restaurant in Kapalua, Kirstin and Michael honeymooned at Hotel Hana Maui.

If travel time is really limited and Hawaii and the Caribbean seem too far away, Baja California also offers some great destination wedding sites. One of these — the oceanfront Esperanza Resort — is located about four miles east of Cabo San Lucas. The hotel can host gatherings of up to 100 guests and has an onsite planner to help couples choose between multiple scenic



Maui is a romantic setting for a destination wedding

ceremony locations and the option of a legal or symbolic marriage. (www.esperanzaresort.com)

Of course, not all destination weddings are oceanfront. Our daughter was married at Quail Botanical Gardens (now San Diego Botanic Gardens). Clearly this was not a destination wedding, but in my travels I have seen many gardens that looked like wonderful places to get married.



The Garden Terrace Room at The New York Botanical Garden exudes classic elegance

Most recently, we visited The New York Botanical Garden — 25 minutes by train from Midtown Manhattan. These are world-class gardens, established in 1891, with two beautiful sites for ceremonies. The intimate Stone Mill, built in 1840 overlooking the Bronx River, has just undergone a \$10 million restoration. In addition, weddings are held in the elegant Garden Terrace Room. This ballroom can accommodate up to 300 guests and features hand-painted murals and Palladian architectural details.

Both spaces are surrounded by the 250-acre garden that includes 30,000 trees, colorful displays of perennials, and a picturesque conservatory.

Abigail Kirsch, renowned for its award-winning cuisine and event management, is the exclusive caterer for The New York Botanical Garden. I'm sure they enjoy working with imaginative brides to create memorable celebrations where everyone gets to have fun. (www.nybg.org, www.abigailkirsch.com) ELIZABETH HANSEN

Esperanza Resort in Baja offers several venues for wedding ceremonies and receptions

