

Pack your bags

Take your big day on the road with a destination wedding

By Heather Rothbauer-Wanish

You know you need a travel agent to help you plan your honeymoon destination. Did you know that you can also have a travel agent plan the majority of your wedding? In fact, the wedding and honeymoon can all be rolled into one package. If you and your future spouse are open to the idea of a destination wedding, you could experience one of the most stress-free wedding planning experiences possible.

Overview

What exactly is a destination wedding? This type of wedding occurs when a bride and groom travel to a destination and get married at that location. This could mean a couple traveling within the United States or internationally, depending on their individual preferences. Preference is the key — you can choose each of the individual aspects of your wedding, just as if you were in your hometown.

Although you can attempt a destination wedding on your own, it may be best to contact a local travel agency or independent travel agent. These travel consultants will have the experience and inside knowledge of planning a destination wedding. They are familiar with the necessary paperwork and may be able to work with the different locations to find the best deal for you and your future spouse.

Once you and your future spouse decide to meet with a travel agency, the agent will begin the process of finding out what you are looking for in your destination wedding experience. According to Jackie Miller, travel consultant with Chippewa Valley Travel Service, "The first questions we discuss are: When do you want to get married? Where do you want to get married? How long do you want to be gone?" Based upon the answers



Contributed photo

Ryan and Nicole Decker, Eau Claire, celebrated their dream wedding with a kiss at the Excellence Resort in the Dominican Republic in February.

to these questions, agents can begin designing a wedding package to meet your needs.

Brent and Shirley McIlquham chose to have their February 2005 wedding in Cozumel, Mexico. "We decided on Mexico because neither of us had ever been anywhere tropical and warm," Shirley said. "I

worked with the on-site wedding coordinator through e-mail. It was nice and simple."

Gary Benson, a travel counselor with Follow Your Dreams Travel and Cruise, said he has clients who know exactly where they want to go and clients who want his advice. For destination weddings, he has

traveled to most of the locations. If it is not a location he has visited, he networks with other agents who have been to the site. Based on his experiences in planning weddings, he has found that popular destinations include Italy, Hawaii, Mexico, Jamaica and Las Vegas.

Wayne and Michelle Christensen enjoyed a destination wedding in February 2000. They chose to go to one of the Breezes Resorts in Jamaica. They were married near the ocean two days after their arrival; they stayed an additional six days after the wedding. The planning process was minimal for the couple. The Christensens, former Eau Claire residents who now live in Sun Prairie, said "We went through a local travel agent and she took care of everything."

Miller stressed that destination weddings are legal weddings. Depending upon the location choice to begin your wedded bliss, you will want to verify the necessary paperwork needed for the official marriage license. Your travel consultant will be able to arrange the necessary notarizations, photocopies and passports needed. Many times, birth certificates and divorce decrees (if any) must be notarized and sent ahead to the destination.

In addition to taking care of paperwork, your travel consultant will work with the on-site wedding coordinator to handle the details.

"The on-site wedding coordinators take care of everything for you," Miller said. Coordinators have a great deal of experience planning these weddings and have the entire system down to a science. According to Miller, "The cake, flowers and actual ceremony site will be decided once you're there."

For the bride who longs for a stress-free wedding, the on-site wedding coordinator can be a dream come true.

"Our wedding coordinator really

took care of things for us," Christensen said. "She took care of the cake, decorations, photographer, videographer and minister. She even arranged for a horse-drawn carriage after the ceremony."

Depending upon the country and individual resort couples select for their wedding, the variety of ceremony locations can vary. For instance, some resorts have churches, while others have another area where weddings occur. The most common wedding location within a resort is the gazebo or beach.

Jamaica has proven to be the no.1 one location of choice for Miller's clients. Jamaica has the benefit of an exotic location, business dealings in English and very experienced destination wedding resorts. "Some of the resorts have several weddings per day," she said.

Plan, plan, plan

Just as resorts have experience with destination weddings, so do travel agencies. As a travel consultant, Miller said, "There are advantages to using an agency in this situation."

- * The agency verifies documents are correct.

- * A consultant/agent will be in contact with the on-site wedding coordinator.

- * Travel agencies are available if there are difficulties once you are on-site.

Travel counselor Benson said the sooner you can begin working on your wedding, the better.

"Start looking at everything at least a year ahead," he said.

Although resorts can be flexible with dates and may have last-minute openings, the airlines are the difficult component when short-term planning is necessary.

"The sooner you can lock in a price and reservation, the better," he said.

The McIlquahams also



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recommend planning early.

"We were married in February 2005, but we started planning in September 2004," Shirley said.

Planning ahead also allows the travel agent to work with guests who may be flying from another part of the country. For example, the bride and groom may be leaving from the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport, while other family members are leaving from Chicago. These types of situations can be managed by the travel agent and can be managed better the earlier they know.

Miller agreed with Benson and encourages couples to consult a travel agency as soon as they know they are considering a destination wedding. Although documents may be able to be processed more quickly, most agents prefer to have 60 days to get all of the paperwork prepared.

Why a destination

Each couple has different wishes for their wedding day, and couples need to first decide if a destination wedding is right for them. So, how do you know if this is the right wedding experience for you? There are many reasons why couples would consider a destination wedding; www.thebigday.com lists several reasons a couple may decide

to experience their wedding as a destination wedding:

- * Increased romance — A destination wedding typically has fewer guests and less chaos surrounding the reception.

- * Cost effectiveness for the couple — There will be fewer guests, less food and receptions cost less.

- * Vacation opportunity — Couples can combine the wedding and honeymoon into an extended vacation.

- * Must-have attraction — A wedding at another location will offer attractions not typically available where couples live.

For those couples who choose a destination wedding, the experience can be unforgettable. "As a travel consultant, I haven't had one bad experience with a destination wedding," Miller said.

Christensen echoes that sentiment.

"I absolutely would recommend people consider a destination wedding," she said. "We didn't have to deal with a lot of stress and we didn't need to worry. We have never had any regrets regarding our destination wedding in Jamaica."

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Making an interfaith wedding work for both

By Metro Newspaper Services

While a person's wedding day is a time for celebration, as any bride and groom know, the day itself and the months leading up to the big event can be stressful.

Such stress is often heightened for couples in which each person is from a different religious background. Whereas such couples used to be rare, studies continue to show that interfaith marriages are on the rise. In the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey, nearly 25 percent of all couples responding were in interfaith marriages.

Interfaith couples need to do extra work with respect to their wedding day, taking care of certain matters that, for couples of the same faith, needn't be discussed. For interfaith couples, the following tips should help ease the stress of the big day.

- Determine what's most important: Despite being raised in a particular faith, many adults either don't regularly attend religious ceremonies or consider themselves as practicing a particular religion. In fact, a 2005 survey titled "Atheism: Contemporary Rates and Patterns," found that 39 percent of Americans considered themselves either agnostics (claiming no

belief or disbelief in God) or atheists (claiming disbelief in God). For interfaith couples about to get married, it's important to truly consider one's beliefs. Bride and groom should examine how meaningful their faith is to them, and what they can live with or without in a wedding ceremony.

- Attend a service, be it a wedding or weekly service, from each faith: Knowledge is a great mediator when deciding how to conduct an interfaith ceremony. Learn as much as possible about each other's faith and traditions. Attending a service or ceremony might even open your eyes to an element of your partner's faith that you find appealing and might want to include in the ceremony. In addition, knowing about a partner's faith will help you better understand their thought process when planning the ceremony.

- Consider two ceremonies: Sometimes one or both persons decide their faith is very important and they insist on a traditional ceremony being performed. This isn't all that uncommon, and can appease the families of both people getting married, as couples won't run the risk of leaving something important out of the ceremony.