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Expert tips for planning far-flung nuptials

By Necee Regis

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So, you want to have a destination wedding? Before you fly off to your magical ceremony with your closest family and friends, you'll need to be super-organized to ensure it all goes smoothly. From choosing your desired location to arranging for accommodations and inviting guests, here are some experts' tips on planning far-flung nuptials.

Where

It may seem obvious, but the first thing to do is decide on the destination. Are you imagining a beach, woodlands, mountaintop, or grand castle setting? One thing to consider is ease-of-access for your guests, especially if you're inviting grandparents or friends with small children who may not be able to manage multiple flight transfers or camel rides through the desert. That said, Shelli Nornes, president of Romance Travel, reminds her clients, "This is your wedding. Do what makes you happy, and people will come or they won't."

Requirements for a legal wedding vary by state and by country, so allow

time to research and complete marriage certificate applications. Be aware that some foreign destinations may ask for letters of intent, birth, and medical certificates, or even proof of recent residency. A way to circumnavigate such requirements is to have a legal ceremony in your home city, and a symbolic one with family and friends.

"Symbolic weddings save time and stress," said Nornes, adding that most of her clients choose this option.

How much

Whether your wedding is a modest affair or an over-the-top extravaganza, you'll want to set a budget. Destination weddings are usually more intimate affairs than hometown weddings. Fewer guests can lower your costs, so making a list of hoped-for attendees can help in budgeting. Once that's established, it's easier to make choices on venue, catering, flowers, and accommodations. This is where a dedicated consultant can make a big difference, as most destination wedding planners are connected to a wide range of resorts in many locations and can guide you through a maze



JOHN LOCHER/AP

Michael Van Worner and Erin Clemens' "Star Wars"-themed wedding in Vegas. Top: Kelly Staunton and bridesmaids at Falmouth Heights in 2011.

of choices.

"You can book a vacation online, but a wedding is much more challenging," said Christina Inglezakis, national sales director for Liberty Travel. "Our agents have at least 10 years of experience in the industry, and can help choose the right resort based on your guest list, budget, and events."

If such a service isn't in your budget,

you can search online for hotels or all-inclusive resorts that offer wedding packages with an on-site coordinator. However, you might save time and money in the long run by working with a company familiar with multiple resorts and destinations.

"First and foremost, it really helps if couples find a travel agent that specializes in wedding travel because we know

the resorts inside and out," said Nornes. "I like to play matchmaker, pairing couples with the perfect resort."

Whether you work with a coordinator or organize on your own, it's a good idea to visit your destination well in advance of the wedding. Website images can be deceiving, and touring the venue in person will help eliminate surprises.

When

Destination weddings are not usually last-minute affairs. Resorts sell out quickly, so if you want your resort of choice and preferred date, it's suggested that you start planning 16 to 18 months in advance.

Once you've selected the destination and confirmed the venue, it's generally recommended to send out "save the date" cards nine to 12 months prior to the event so guests can mark their calendars. The actual invitation, sent three to four months out, is where you'll offer more detailed information.

Guests should be made aware if they are responsible for their own transportation and lodging costs (typically, they are) but you can make things easier for them by securing a block of rooms at the hotel where the wedding will be held, or providing a range of options at different price points that are located near to the ceremony. To aid in sharing such information, Liberty Travel will create a complimentary, personalized wedding website that helps you and your guests to stay organized. Attendees can use the site as a handy reference for finding accommodation options, easy ways to book and pay for rooms directly, learn what other events are part of the wedding weekend, and more.

If your destination is outside of the United States, you'll need to let guests know about specific travel protocols, such as the need for visas and/or vaccinations, and advise them to make sure their passports are up to date.

Extras

Considering that your guests have traveled from afar and might be in an unfamiliar location, you might want to incorporate additional gatherings into the festivities, such as a rehearsal dinner and/or post-wedding brunch. In addition, some couples like to extend the celebration and offer tours or experiences that highlight the particular destination, such as wine tastings in Napa, bird-watching excursions in the Caribbean, or, yes, those camel rides in Morocco.

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Traveling on the cheap is priceless

►CHEAP

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during the pandemic was Zoom into a virtual travel club at Boston's French Library. And it was there that he heard about Workaway, through which travelers can work their way around the world by trading their labor for accommodations.

"You can create your own adventure," said Hansen, 27, of Worcester, who in December began an around-the-world Workaway trip in which he has so far worked at a family-run hostel in Vietnam and a farm in Nepal, as a photographer in Oman and a home health aide in Switzerland, and as a builder of eco-friendly houses in Tunisia, all in exchange for room and board.

As inflation and pent-up demand make travel more and more expensive, people are finding novel and expanding ways to do it cheaply or for free.

Also in exchange for accommodations, travelers can work at hostels and as house sitters, helpers on organic farms or couriers (who get not only room and board, but transportation).

Even in an era of suspicion and division, there are growing numbers of hosts worldwide who let strangers crash on their couches through organizations including Couchsurfing and WarmShowers. Travelers can use HomeExchange to swap houses with people in 130 countries and MindMyHouse and HouseCarers to find house-sitting gigs worldwide. And like Workaway, Worldpackers helps people trade their work — usually 25 to 30 hours a week of it — for room and board.

These approaches appeal these days to not only the traditional twenty-something backpackers, but to everyone from high school graduates on gap years to workers between jobs to early retirees. And while it often starts as a way of saving money, traveling this way turns out to be about much more than that, sometimes to the surprise of even the people who do it.

"Most of the time when you travel



Volunteers for WWOOF USA working on a farm for room and board. Right: Some people volunteer at hostels in exchange for free accommodations after working a certain number of hours.

you just get on a plane and you're teleported to someplace different and then you get back on the plane and you're teleported home, whereas this is a way to slow things down," said Hansen, who on his travels has been a guest at a Vietnamese wedding, heard stories of the Nepalese civil war over barbecue on the farm where he worked in the foothills of the Himalayas, and coached the son of another host in soccer.

"It's completely leveling the playing field" compared to the usual travel dynamic of parachuting in and buying hospitality, he said. "It's more about: I'm a human, you're a human, I can learn something from you, and you can learn something from me."

Couchsurfers is completely free but most other services charge annual fees: \$29 for MindMyHouse, \$49 for Worldpackers and Workaway, \$50 for HouseCarers. WarmShowers has a \$30 lifetime membership for access to a list of hosts and ratings.

Many of these programs report fast-growing interest. A Workaway spokeswoman said demand is up, and a spokeswoman for an organization that arranges volunteer bone marrow and stem cell courier said there's a long waiting list (though she also warned that the logistics are complex and that seeing the world for free was not the best motivation for that kind of an undertaking).

Membership is also rising fast at WWOOF, or Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms, said Tori Fetrow, outreach and marketing manager for the US chapter of the organization, which places people on farms worldwide to work for room and board; accommodations can be yurts, RVs, tents, or bedrooms in farmhouses.

Many find their way to WWOOF to save themselves money while they travel, Fetrow said. But then it turns out there are other, less tangible benefits.

"WWOOF at its core is all about connections — the personal connection that's formed between the WWOOFer and the farmer," who may live vastly different lives, she said.

"They're working alongside each other every day. They're making meals together. They're eating meals together. No matter what their differences might be, they find ways to connect."

Hostelling International USA, or HI USA, is bringing new attention to a program under which people who provide free tours and other services to guests in their local hostels get one complimentary night at any other US hostel after 45 hours of volunteering and an additional night for every 15 hours after that.

Even for volunteers who don't take advantage of those free nights, there are benefits, said Danielle Brumfitt, spokeswoman for HI USA, which has started



hiring volunteer coordinators for its urban hostels as it continues to expand the program.

"This gives them an opportunity to meet our guests," said Brumfitt. "They might not be traveling, but they're meeting people from Europe or from Asia."

That's the main reason John Donnellan volunteers to lead weekly tours of Boston for guests of the Stuart Street hostel, he said. "I get to know people from everywhere," said Donnellan, 56, who's done it long enough to earn a free stay at a HI USA hostel in Santa Monica, Calif.

People who volunteer for other kinds of community service can also apply for free overnights in hostels through a separate arrangement called the Great Hostel Giveback.

Meanwhile, more people are choosing to pay to stay in hostels — some of which have private rooms — as the cost of hotels and homeshares goes up, Brumfitt said.

Between jobs, David Terwilliger of Brighton flew with his bike to the West Coast and rode from Seattle to Vancouver, then south to Tijuana and back to Los Angeles, finding places to stay, and meals, through WarmShowers. The price: telling stories to his hosts about his trip.

"For the most part, these were people who had done this, too, when they

were younger," said Terwilliger, 30, a software consultant.

The experience "really changed the adventure for me," he said. "I was going to go as fast as I could and impress my friends on Strava. And then I started talking to the WarmShowers people. It made me slow down and smell the flowers. Those human interactions reinforced the sense of the goodness of humanity, which I wasn't going to get staying in hotels by myself."

Hosts get as much out of it as the cyclists do, said Richard Martin, a retired woodland firefighter on the Pacific Coast Highway who was one of Terwilliger's.

"I want to hear about their travels," Martin said. "I like meeting people. You've got people who have been on the road for months on end, and I try to make them feel like family for a night."

Hansen, who is now in France, said living cheaply on the road has widened his horizons rather than narrowed them.

"That's the whole purpose of travel: to challenge you and push you," he said.

"I know I will be welcomed by friendly people who I've never met before," he said. "It's a big world, and it's all accessible. If you have a passport, you can just spin the globe and go."

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