

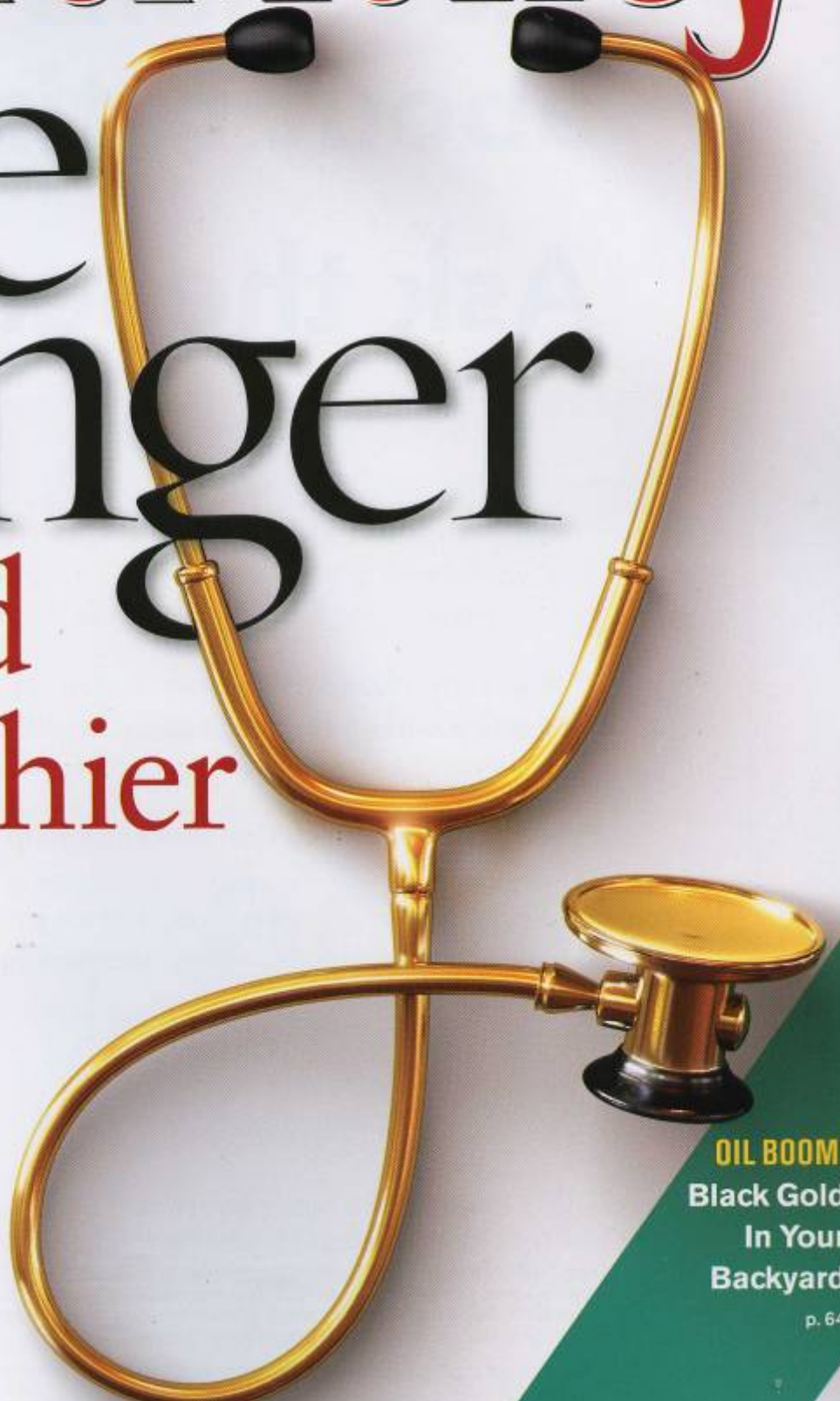
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Married Away

Once the province of a free-spirited few who wanted to wed barefoot on the beach, far-flung nuptials are up 400 percent in the past decade.

AS THE ROLLING STONES so aptly put it, you can't always get what you want—especially if you're wearing white. Determined to avoid being a bridezilla with a typically splashy hometown wedding, Lauren Abramson and her fiancé aimed for a more modest affair—2,000 miles from home. It was at a place they had never visited before, in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, and it wasn't long before just getting

Smart Spending

e-mail responses from the property's wedding coordinator (who doubles as a waitress) became an ordeal. The couple asked for a basic, nonreligious ceremony but got a minister from the hotel who kept referring to "our friend from above" and called Lauren "Laurel." The biggest downer was the cost: \$20,000 for an event with 28 people, twice their original budget.

LUCKILY, ABRAMSON, a schoolteacher from Morris Township, N.J., and her husband, Keith, were pretty laid-back about it all. They thought the minister was so funny they considered putting the wedding video on YouTube. And besides, she says, the whole wedding group had a blast, enjoying perfect weather and diversions like rock climbing, Jet Skiing, even zipping through the treetops on canopy tours. Still, when it came to the wedding

details, "they really nickel-and-dime you," she says.

Once upon a time couples who wanted to tie the knot without pomp, circumstance and crippling credit card debt had an easy out: the destination wedding. Just a step or two removed from eloping, the event was usually a last-minute affair, with bride and groom exchanging vows in a casual beachside ceremony, then living happily ever after. These days the fairy tale reads a little differently. Routine married-in-Margaritaville trips are only the beginning, as more couples are now eyeing quaint Irish castles and Tahitian resorts as backdrops for their I do's. Indeed, the "away wedding" has become the hottest part of the booming \$86 billion wedding industry. In 2006, 16 percent of couples

had a destination wedding, up fourfold in a decade, according to the American Wedding Study.

Not surprisingly, resorts, event planners and local tourism boards are hungry for a slice of the wedding cake. Fashion designers tout special destination-wedding dresses that they claim won't wrinkle or stretch in the heat, while tourism boards support Web sites like MarryCaribbean.com. The "Destination Professionals" section of the Association for Wedding Professionals International's Web site contains 144 listings, covering everywhere from Ireland to Hong Kong. At Sandals Resorts, one of the first to see the potential of the nuptial market, couples have a choice of six "WeddingMoon" packages, including a \$5,000 rose, orchid and shell-themed decor



WEDDINGS IN SCOTLAND have less red tape than those in England, where both bride and groom are required to be in residence for a week.



designed by celebrity-wedding stylist Preston Bailey. Brides can even buy a gown from the Sandals online store. "Now everybody's in on the game," says Rebecca Grinnals, president of wedding-industry consulting company Engaging Concepts.

But what about the couple—and all their guests doing the traveling? We did some digging to see, for example, how much these far-flung events cost, since for most couples planning them, savings are a big incentive. The average cost, \$25,806, is about 7 percent less than that of a traditional ceremony. But with an average of 47 guests (the standard hometown bash has 165), distant celebrations shake out to a pricey \$549 per guest, versus \$169 on these shores—and that's before travel costs. Yet price isn't the only issue. The Caribbean, of course, is big for these events, but hurricanes can quickly blow the charm out of an island resort. Thanks to bureaucratic hassles, some couples also come back without a legally binding piece of paper to go with their sunburns and shiny new rings. Below, our guide to a hot new niche in travel.

BRIDES HAVE ONE place to thank for creating the destination-wedding craze: Hawaii, with its romantic beaches, tropical waterfalls and the convenience of being part of the U.S. Last year 17,937 nonresidents married there, up 63 percent in a decade, and the state's wedding industry has become an essential piece of its tourism economy. Maui alone boasts nearly 300 wedding coordinators, and betrothed couples can choose packages ranging from the Sheraton Maui Resort's \$23,000 Royal Alii wedding package to Beachwed.com's \$75 Wiki Wiki Quickie. But while Hawaii still holds the title, hosting one out of every four destination weddings, countries the world over have now plunged into



WHETHER IT'S A "WIKI WIKI QUICKIE" or a more elaborate affair, Hawaii hosts nearly one in four destination weddings.

the marriage market, whether it's Cape Town resorts or Swedish ice hotels offering their own takes on nuptial bliss.

And no wonder it's spreading. With many couples now marrying later—or for the second or third time—the old hometown wedding doesn't always make sense. Brides and grooms often hail from different parts of the country (or world), meaning most guests will rack up hefty travel costs no matter what. A destination affair allows couples to trim the guest list without hurt feelings, and a laid-back setting gives repeat brides and grooms an excuse to celebrate without rehashing all the traditional trappings of their first go-round. Perhaps the biggest plus, though, is simply the fun factor. Ideally, a destination wedding swaps the typical night of rambling toasts

and Motown covers for a multiday vacation with some of your closest friends and family.

For Peter and Janel Trivelas, the choice was obvious. The couple split their time between Boston and



I-Do Deals With more hotels wooing couples, almost everyone has their own version of the perfect wedding package. But while they overlap on the basics (an officiant, ceremony location, bouquets and boutonnieres), it's the details that can make or break the big day. Below, a few popular options:



LOCATION	PACKAGE/ COST	PACKAGE PERK	COMMENT
Sheraton Maui Resort Maui	Royal Alii \$23,000	Solo Hawaiian guitarist	Even with three nights included, we're in sticker shock. But with activities like snorkeling and surfing available at nearby Ka'anapali Beach, guests won't be bored.
The Four Seasons George V Paris	Gardenia Wedding \$15,900	Flowers on cocktail and dinner tables	Includes a helping hand with the <i>très compliqué</i> French paperwork. Bring 30 or more guests and get a free superior room or deluxe suite.
Marquis Los Cabos Los Cabos, Mexico	Platinum \$5,215	Bulgari gift basket	Budget-minded couples can cut costs by \$645 if they brave the steamy off-season. But for postnuptial privacy, the beachfront casitas are worth the upgrade.
Hartwell House Aylesbury, England	Civil Ceremony and Rooms, \$18,843	Ten suites and six rooms for the wedding party	Not the best spot for a blowout, since sit-down receptions are capped at 60 guests. But these Brits aren't too proper for fun, with dancing raging until midnight.
Elbow Beach Paget Parish, Bermuda	Eternity \$5,500	Reception with steel-drum player	Don't skip the fine print: requires a minimum \$2,000 food-and-beverage spend. Even cake, usually gratis, is an extra \$10.50 per person.

New York and knew that a wedding in either city would be pricey. Determined to find an island where they could have an intimate and "authentic" experience, the couple settled on Anguilla. Peter says most guests seemed excited about a tropical getaway, and 40 people came, some staying an entire week. The group spent their days chowing down at beachside barbecues, sipping cocktails at the hotel's tiki bar and discovering favorite spots like Elvis' Beach Bar, housed in a beached racing boat. "The group developed a real chemistry," says Peter, adding that they're planning to reunite next year on the island for the couple's first anniversary.

Of course, it's not all rum punch and palm trees. Want to make the ceremony legally binding? The paperwork alone can make tax forms look like kid stuff. On the easy side are places like Jamaica, which mandates a 24-hour waiting period after the marriage license is issued, but European destinations are trickier; England requires both bride and groom to be in the country for a week, while France demands 40 days. For its part, Italy still requires that key documents like birth certificates

be translated into Italian. And back home most U.S. states require foreign marriage licenses to be professionally translated before being used for basics like changing a driver's license.

For many couples these are exactly the types of headache that prompt them to hire an on-location wedding planner to help with paperwork and booking vendors and hotels. But with a destination wedding, couples can't exactly hop in the car and check out a planner's suggestions, meaning they're almost solely reliant on someone else's eyes, ears and, occasionally, mouth (cake tasting, anyone?). But finding someone to trust with these big—and expensive—decisions can be a challenge, particularly in destinations that have only recently started hosting elaborate, American-style weddings. Planners themselves say it's difficult to keep up with demand for experienced staff: "It hasn't been easy for us to recruit," says Jo-Anne Brown, the founder of Cayman Islands-based Celebrations, which handles about 120 destination weddings a year.

BLUE SKIES, as any bride knows, are never a given. Wedding insurance can help if a hurricane hits your chosen destination.

With or without a planner, many couples are tapping into one of the burgeoning number of nuptial packages being offered by resorts eager to serve the romance market.



That is, assuming a couple doesn't bristle at assembly-line treatment and some prefab trappings like twinkle lights or tiki torches. Packages often bundle the ceremony and reception costs along with extras as varied as a Fijian choir, keepsake wedding certificates and his-and-her "Just Married" flip-flops. At the Sandals and Beaches resorts, where weddings and honeymoons (often combined) make up 40 percent of business, individual properties employ two to four wedding specialists, overseen by a corporate "chief romance officer." But most other resorts still have only one wedding coordinator on staff, who is often too busy churning through several ceremonies a day to spend much phone time with future clients. "Their main function is to get the wedding in and out, not necessarily to focus on getting the bride everything she needs," says Richard Markel, director of the Association for

Wedding Professionals International.

The wedding industry has begun to address some of the issues plaguing destination-bound couples. Wedding insurance companies, for example, now offer policies like the \$380 one from Wedsafe that covers couples up to \$35,000, against things like natural disasters. Some hotels are consciously cutting back on the wedding-factory pace, with locations like the Westin Maui Resort & Spa in Hawaii, which used to host five or six ceremonies daily, now usually capping them at one a day. Some are also making it easier for potential newlyweds to vet the facilities firsthand by offering discounted stays prior to the wedding.

And occasionally, a destination wedding can provide the kind of perks that make all the headaches worthwhile. Take the Trivelases, who, on their last night in Anguilla, found themselves at a bar with the king of island cool himself, Jimmy Buffett. ☺

For the Uninvited

Weddings are great, but not when conga lines thump nonstop below your room. We asked some travel agents how other resort guests can avoid the ruckus.

- **Choose vacation destinations** where red tape makes it harder for foreigners to wed. French colony Martinique isn't as wedding-friendly as, say, Jamaica.
- **Find a resort** that limits wedding traffic, like Grand Cayman's Reef Resort or the Westin Maui.
- **Avoid your resort's** busy nuptial season; it's not always June. Take a chance on hurricane season and you'll sidestep the wedding rush.
- **Book rooms far** from the ballrooms. And to avoid late-night revelers lurching loudly down your hall, request rooms away from any wedding party's.

