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# destination weddings & honeymoons

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# destination weddings made easy

LOOKING FOR HELP TO TAKE YOUR SHOW ON THE ROAD? ON-THE-GROUND EXPERTS FROM ACROSS THE GLOBE SHARE THEIR TOP TIPS FOR DESTINATION BRIDES. BY LISA MILBRAND

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Some advice works for any destination wedding — but other aspects of planning are peculiar to the place you're marrying, like the fact that not all contracts in Mexico are legally binding or that beaches in the United States are generally open to the public. So it pays to do a little homework before you settle on a site to ensure your wedding will be everything you want. Here are insider secrets to help you plan the perfect celebration at your destination — no matter where your wedding takes you.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY EDWIN FOTHERINGHAM



# tricks of the trade



{ MEXICO }

## Raise a glass to suit your locale.

Nix the champagne toast in Mexico, and celebrate your nuptials with something homegrown. “Who drinks wine in Mexico?” says Sasha Souza. “Pick a specialty margarita, aged tequila or something else local. You can find a cocktail that’s really cool.”



wanted to officiate, stepped in to give a personalized blessing and announce, “You may now kiss the bride.”

**ASK ABOUT VISITOR PASSES.** “Most all-inclusive resorts charge a visitor fee

for outside wedding guests, even if the guest is only coming for the ceremony and doesn’t plan to stay for the reception,” says Carmichael. “Try to negotiate a couple of free passes along with your wedding package.”

**ADJUST TO ISLAND TIME.** “Every minute in the States is like three minutes of Caribbean time,” says Brisman. “You have to be a little more patient, as things go a little slower there.”

**BRANCH OUT FROM YOUR RESORT.** Heading offsite can make for a memorable rehearsal dinner or post-wedding brunch. “Most Caribbean islands have wonderful restaurants, and they do special events all the time,” Brisman says. Arrange for group transportation to offsite events so guests don’t have to navigate the landscape on their own.

### MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA

**DON’T BANK ON A BARGAIN.** If you’re hitting a tourist mecca like Cabo San Lucas or Cancun, you’re going to pay for the privilege. “Towns that are known destination-wedding venues can be just as expensive as home,” Souza says. “You’re paying U.S. dollars.”

**BE AWARE OF SPECIFIC RESIDENCY REQUIREMENTS.** “Requirements for a legal wedding within Mexico can vary from state to state, region to region, even resort to resort,” says Carmichael. “Also, the residency requirements apply to your witnesses as well. So those important people you want to sign your marriage documents need to be there the same amount of time as you do.”

**NEGOTIATE FOR A LITTLE PEACE OF MIND.** Most contracts in Mexico aren’t binding, so you have no legal recourse if your resort suddenly cancels your event. For starters, be sure you’re working with a reputable vendor by checking references and sites like [tripadvisor.com](http://tripadvisor.com). Holding back a portion of the payment until the services have been rendered can also increase your confidence. “To the extent possible, try not to pay your vendors in full in advance,” says Green. “Many hotels will require a deposit, and some request the final payment a month or more beforehand. If

the couple has outlaid the entire amount prior to the event, they'll have less financial leverage. However, if the hotel has a solid reputation with destination weddings, it can often dictate the terms."

**BE SURE THE PACKAGE FITS.** "All-inclusive wedding packages can be more difficult to customize," says Green. "Be sure you're happy with the options the package has to offer. You don't want to find out later that the resort doesn't have a place for a private reception or won't let you bring in your own photographer."

**CONSIDER A VILLA.** Haciendas are plentiful in Central America, and these grand vacation homes, which often come with pools, tennis courts and more, can give you an intimate and affordable event. "It can be more cost-effective in the long run to use a villa," says Souza. "And since you're not limited to hotel decorations, you can do what you'd like."

**TIP IN DOLLARS.** Converting all your cash to pesos isn't necessary; most vendors in Central America are thrilled to be tipped in American dollars. "They get more for their money when they exchange U.S. dollars," Souza says.

**TRY A TUX ALTERNATIVE.** "When you're marrying in a tropical locale like Mexico, let your groomsmen skip the suits or tuxedos and wear traditional Guayabera wedding shirts instead," says Stephanie Skiba of Cozumel Wedding Planner. "They're light, crisp and classy, and you can have them embroidered in colors to match the wedding theme."

## HAWAII AND THE SOUTH PACIFIC

**FIND THE RIGHT ISLAND.** Each isle has its own strengths. "Take a good pulse of the guests expected to attend," says Beth Helmstetter of Beth Helmstetter Events. "If your group includes big partiers who stay out until the wee hours of the morning, then Oahu is the best option for you; Kauai tends to close



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# tricks of the trade

up after sunset. If you have a group of thrill-seekers who want to try hiking or mountain biking, head to Maui or the Big Island.”

**PLAN AHEAD.** “The main mistake I see couples making is waiting too long to book their location or vendors,” says Jill La Fleur of La Fleur Weddings & Events, a Santa Barbara, California-based planning company that does a lot of events in Hawaii. “Couples generally should start planning at least one year out so they have their choice of venues, flights, hotel rooms and vendors for their chosen wedding day. Waiting too long will cost more and limit your options.”

**RESEARCH YOUR ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS.** While big resorts can make wedding and travel planning easier, you may want to send some of your guests a little off the beaten path.

“Condos are great for your guest accommodations,” La Fleur says. “They’re affordable and offer kitchens, living rooms and often swimming pools and barbecue areas so families can feel like they’re at their home away from home.”

**CONSIDER DAYS OTHER THAN SATURDAY.** “When traveling to Hawaii and points beyond, your guests will likely spend more than just a couple of days and make a vacation out of their trip. That means you don’t have to worry so much about what day of the week you book your actual wedding,” La Fleur says. “Choosing a weekday can help you get a prime location and vendors.”

**GET A PERMIT.** New regulations from Hawaii’s Department of Land and Natural Resources require you to obtain a beach-use permit for all ocean-side nuptials — even if it’s just the two of you.

“The purpose of the permits is to control the amount and type of activity on these beaches in order to protect them,” says La Fleur. Some beaches of particular ecological or cultural value have been declared off-limits for weddings. Visit [hawaii.gov/dlnr/land/forms-1/forms](http://hawaii.gov/dlnr/land/forms-1/forms) for more information.

**MIND THE TIME DIFFERENCE.** Depending on where you are, South Pacific destinations can be anywhere from three to six hours behind Pacific Standard Time, which will affect communication with onsite pros. “Plan accordingly when you need to communicate by phone or email,” says Byron.

**DON'T COUNT ON OVERNIGHT.** “There’s no such thing as overnight shipping to Hawaii,” Helmstetter says. “As a general rule, it takes two days for an overnight package to arrive in Hawaii,



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three days for a two-day package to arrive and so on. So it's best not to leave shipping items to the last minute."

## EUROPE

**BOOK WELL IN ADVANCE.** While some destinations may be available with just a few months' notice, in the most popular locales, you'll need to book much further in advance. "One of the most common mistakes I see is waiting too long to do the bookings," says Elisa Males of My Wedding Italy. "In popular places, reserve everything at least one year earlier if you're having a wedding for more than 20 guests."

**KNOW THE LAWS OF CHURCH AND STATE.** In many European countries, only civil weddings are binding, so you may need to have a civil ceremony in addition to any religious service you

have planned. "A church wedding doesn't cancel out the need for a civil wedding here in Austria," says Michaela Honies of Elegant Events in Vienna.

**MIND THE EXCHANGE RATE.** Lately, the dollar has been weak against the euro — and if the dollar goes down between the time you sign your contract and your wedding date, you could be looking at a sizable increase in the actual cost. "Do your contract in dollars," Byron suggests. "If you can't, consider stashing aside some money to be prepared for an increase." If the dollar gains strength, you'll have something extra saved for your honeymoon.

**WHEEL AND DEAL.** "On the one hand, Europe is more expensive now because of the stronger euro, but on the other, Europeans realize they need to do things to attract American clientele, as they're

definitely desperate for business," says Byron. "Ask about discounts, or see if they'll waive the room-rental fee or some other charge."

**RESEARCH THE IMPORT RULES.** "If you want to buy favors in the U.S., you need to understand what can pass through customs," says Byron. "You don't want things to get delayed. I know of a wedding in Moscow where the favors were stuck for three weeks before a high official could get them out! If you plan to ship anything, give yourself a tremendous amount of time."

**PLAN AROUND THE VENUE'S SCHEDULE.** "Some historic buildings are also tourist attractions, so if you want to get married there, choose a time when you can avoid the crowds," suggests Honies. "This is usually later in the day, but not always."

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