



FEBRUARY 2018

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SELLING WEDDINGS AND HONEYMOONS

Expert tips to help you grow your romance bookings

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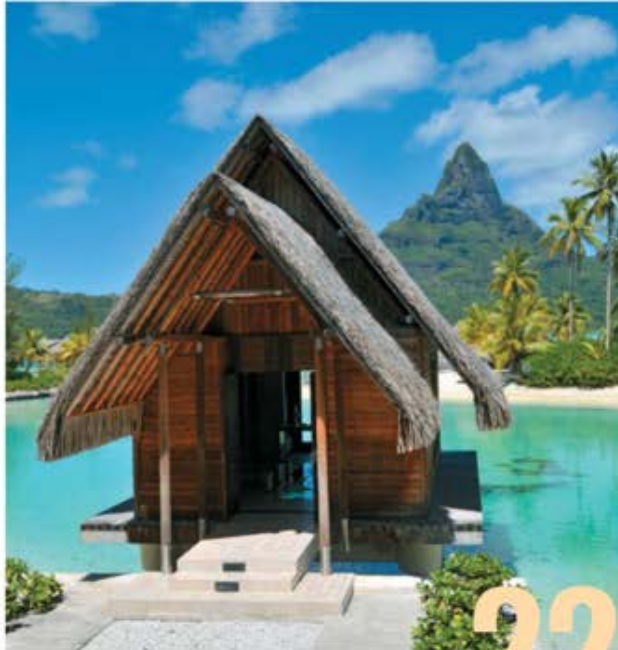
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TravelAgent

FEBRUARY 2018 | Volume 351, Number 2

www.travelagentcentral.com



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DESTINATION WEDDINGS AND HONEYMOONS

10 Trends and tips on everything from the proposal, places and products to the pitfalls of planning

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SELLING DESTINATION WEDDINGS AND HONEYMOONS

BY ADAM LEPOSA, DAVID K. MOSEDER, JOE PIKE AND MATT TURNER

VARIOUS REPORTS put the revenue generated by the wedding industry as high as \$76 billion annually, with average wedding costs reaching new highs year after year (more than \$35,000, excluding honeymoon, according to *The Knot's* most recent Real Weddings Study).

To help you get your slice of the cake, **Travel Agent** spoke to a number of top experts in the destination weddings and honeymoons market and uncovered several trends and tips on everything from the proposal, places and products to the pitfalls of planning. Here's what we learned:

Destination Proposals

The practice of traveling to a beautiful location to pop the question began to catch on a few years ago, mostly among Millennials looking for a cool, splashy way to promote their engagement on social media. And now, Carolee Higashino, president and founder of White Orchid Wedding (WOW) in Hawaii, says the niche is all the rage these days, from simple proposals to elaborate ones on the beach.

"Many couples are booking our services to arrange for their secret surprise by hiring a paparazzi photography session complete with a ceremony site, flowers, champagne and an intimate dinner for two," says Higashino. "Often family and friends are invited as well and appear once the willing participant says yes."

"Resort staff have always been more than willing to lend an assist in this area — and now hotels are beginning to capitalize with special add-on packages," says Scott Wiseman, president of Travel Impressions. "One of our popular packages is the **Secrets Resorts 'Pop The Question'** package, which features a photo shoot, bouquet of roses, sparkling wine and additional special touches [ranging] from a romantic rose petal- and candle-lined path to the words 'Will you marry me?' written on the sand."

Wiseman also recommends **The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel** in California, which offers two proposal packages that

has all the trimmings, including a kneeling cushion.

"If you're aware that a proposal is in the works and are not recommending one of these commissionable packages, you're leaving money on the table," says Wiseman. "Beyond financial motivations, helping to make your clients' special day even more memorable is a great way to cement loyalty."



The St. Regis Princeville Resort on Kauai is seen as one of the hottest properties to honeymoon at in Hawaii.

Unusual Weddings / Venues

Perhaps the biggest trend in selecting a wedding type or venue is quite simply avoiding a boring, traditional, ballroom wedding and instead opting for a once-in-a-lifetime ceremony.

"No one is getting married in a box anymore," says Jenna Mahoney, travel editor with *Bridal Guide Magazine*. "The days of getting married in a basic ballroom are over because people realize you can be anywhere when you are in ballroom. People now want a sense of place and a sense of experience."

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PHOTO BY GETTY IMAGES / ANNA DEDUKH

LEFT: Couples looking for an out-of-the-box idea to celebrate their big day can opt for an underwater wedding offered by Buddy Dive Resort in Bonaire.

In Palm Springs, CA, plan a wedding at **The Merv Griffin Estate**, the former home of the late singer and television host. Available on the 39-acre property are an infinity-edge pool, a two-plus-acre pond and equestrian racetrack — all of which are perfectly suitable settings for a wedding. Book the couple and their guests on-property.

The estate has two guestrooms in the main house, four guest cabanas to the east and an 1,800-square-foot guest-house to the north. Nearby, the couple and their guests can explore the Mount San Jacinto State Park or Lake Cahuilla, or they can tee off in Hideaway or Madison Golf Club.

Chateau Cocomar is a castle-looking estate in Austin, TX with opulent chandeliers, elegant gardens and French-style ballrooms. It's a wedding-focused venue, so it offers a Bridal Dressing Suite, Groom's Dressing Suite and Family Dressing Suite. There are also seven additional Deluxe Overnight Suites.

For a totally far-out idea, suggest to your clients **The Old Dairy**, located in Bath County, VA. Surrounded by the Allegheny Mountains, this venue was previously a fully functional dairy that operated until the second half of the 20th century. Currently, it's a popular wedding venue with two silos providing the backdrop. Don't worry: The property is fully restored and includes a dance hall. Tip: Make time to enjoy the natural hot springs. The property also

has luxurious interiors, master bedroom suites, soaking tubs, heated floors, large decks and outdoor fire pits. The wedding party will also have access to the exclusive Warm Springs Dairy Community Center, so they can choose to cool off in the outdoor pool, or visit the fitness center, whirlpool and sauna.

Just to the southwest, in Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountains is **The Lodge at Brother's Cove**. This is a great venue for couples who enjoy adventure and fresh mountain air.

The Lodge at Brother's Cove is located on 450 acres; guests can get married outside or indoors under iron chandeliers in front of floor-to-ceiling windows.

Guests can be booked at the main lodge or at any of the other 50 cabins located on the property, sleeping anywhere from two guests to 24. We recommend the Fireflies in the Night property, whose three stories can accommodate 20. Each of the seven rooms has its own flat-screen TV, private ensuite baths, a full kitchen, two dining tables, a fireplace, game room, multiple decks, hammocks and picnic tables.

Honeymoon Destinations / Hotels

When it comes to the two biggest trends in honeymoon planning, several advisors we spoke to point to a client's desire to get married in an exotic location and also their willingness to wait for peak season for the best experience.

Daniela Harrison of Avenues of the World Travel tells **Travel Agent** that her honeymoon-bound clients are choosing bucket list-type destinations like Sri Lanka, Africa, Maldives, Thailand and the Cook Islands, while traditional favorites like Mexico, Caribbean and Europe will always be popular.

"Africa is certainly one of the most romantic destinations for a wedding, honeymoon or anniversary," says Marsha Carroll of Travel Beyond. "Africa has an allure that's captivated the imagination of romantics at heart, boasting wide open spaces, breathtaking sunsets, stunning landscapes and the thrill of wildlife encounters."

In Mexico, Pamela Walker of

Escapes.ca says, she recently received "rave reviews" from a couple she booked at the **Rosas & Xocolate Boutique Hotel + Spa** in Merida, while Sayulita is a great destination for a more chill honeymoon just north of Puerto Vallarta.

And as far as properties go, over-the-water bungalows are dominating honeymoon bookings in both the Caribbean and Mexico.

"Honeymooners have alternate options open to them with opulent over-water bungalows, suites and villas now available in Mexico and the Caribbean, including **El Dorado Maroma**, a **Gourmet Inclusive Resort**, by Karisma in Riviera Maya; **Sandals Royal Caribbean Resort & Private Island**; **Sandals South Coast** in Jamaica and **Sandals Grande St. Lucian Spa & Beach Resort** in Saint Lucia," says Jack E. Richards, president and CEO of Pleasant Holidays.

The new over-the-water bungalows are so popular, says Anna Swenson of Journeys Inc., that travelers will even

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Pamela Walker of Escapes.ca says she recently received "rave reviews" from a couple she booked at the **Rosas & Xocolate Boutique Hotel + Spa** in Merida, Mexico.

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To avoid a dull celebration, here are a few popular, out-of-the-box types and venues that will wow every guest invited. **NAKED WEDDINGS / VOW RENEWALS:** Jamaica's famous all-inclusive, adults-only, clothing-optional resort, Hedonism II, is not your average get-

away and thus doesn't tote just your basic offerings.

Weddings and vow-renewal ceremonies are always complimentary here and the tux and traditional white gown are definitely optional. Wedding packages include a personal wedding planner, a choice of location — whether it be

white-sand beaches, lush tropical gardens or waterfall lagoons — a minister, marriage license, champagne, a wedding cake, flowers and music.

UNDERWATER WEDDINGS: Buddy Dive Resort on the Caribbean island of Bonaire specializes in offering underwater weddings. Their underwater wedding package starts at \$450 per couple and includes dive equipment for bride and groom, an underwater video with editing and music included; and a wedding ceremony at Buddy's Reef. Witnesses, champagne and additional services such as photographer, hairdresser and make-up, bridal bouquet, wedding dinner, party with live music are available upon request.

WEDDINGS AT A VOLCANO: Lena Brown of Largay Travel recommends clients get married in the Napali coast of Hawaii and take a Zodiac to a beach that has a stone-hole arch where the 1976 "King Kong" movie was filmed on Kauai. There is a cabin in the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park that you can rent and you have to hike down to it, says Brown.

Higashino tells us that White Orchid Wedding has also organized incredible experiences atop Maui's volcano Haleakala at sunrise and even performed ceremonies on the Big Island near an active lava flow.

"We love utilizing historic and / or culturally significant spots as well as places that have the true essence of Hawaii," she notes.

GET MARRIED IN THE AFRICAN BUSH: Marsha Carroll of Travel Beyond points to Africa as a trendy spot for fresh wedding idea, specifically a simple ceremony in the African bush.

"All the planning will be arranged by the safari camp, and the intimate experience offers an unforgettable ceremony," she says. "If you prefer something more traditional with ethnic clothing, a Masai blessing can be arranged."

Not-So-Ordinary Domestic Weddings

Travel Agent also rounded up a few destinations in the U.S. for the most Instagram-worthy weddings.

A Pair of Proposal Packages

GET ENGAGED LIKE A ROYAL: Meghan Markle isn't the only American who can have a royal engagement. Now, **The Milestone Hotel**, London's boutique five-star hotel overlooking Kensington Palace, is offering a special "Royal Engagement Package" to celebrate the upcoming nuptials between Prince Harry and American actress Markle.

The two-night package includes Royal Afternoon Tea for two; a romantic turndown with pink Champagne on one night; a chauffeured Bentley to a Hatton Garden jewelry store; a horse-drawn carriage around London to celebrate the new engagement; a private tour of Kensington Palace and a photo session with a hotel photographer in front of Kensington Palace.

A "PERFECT PROPOSAL" IN TUSCANY: **Il Salviatino**, a restored 15th-century villa located in the Tuscan hills of Italy, is offering the "Perfect Proposal" package, which includes accommodations for two nights in the room of the couple's choice; a daily breakfast buffet; a one-hour couples massage at LA SPA; a romantic, candlelit, three-course dinner; and a three-hour tour with a personal shopper who will escort clients to the best jewelers on the Ponte Vecchio and Via Tornabuoni for the best fashion findings.



Il Salviatino in Italy is offering the "Perfect Proposal" package. Seen here is one of the Green-House Suites, which have glass-encased living spaces.