



Isn't It Romantic?

Choose just the right wedding or honeymoon destination to start your lifelong journey together. BY ELYSE GLICKMAN

TO SAY THE CONCEPT of a dream wedding has changed states the obvious. With the world's continents now open to greater exploration and with a broader definition of marriage, more couples are committed to finding that sweet spot where quality prevails over quantity. In other words, if the wedding march will be an expensive affair, why not invest in a customized experience at a place that truly speaks to you — rather than a banquet room party that could be anywhere, filled with dozens of guests you may not know, followed by a beach resort or city break honeymoon that's merely nice.

If you and your betrothed are contemplating these questions, you are not alone. Group-focused travel agency TravelersQ.com reports couples like you are more inclined to prefer spending extra

TROPICAL
TRADITIONS:
Tahitian wedding

PHOTOS: © TAHITI TOURISM

on integrating locally sourced foods, music and other traditions of the destination into their festivities. This approach not only makes a wedding more personalized but also a more unforgettable experience for the entire party, as it will be more immersive, interactive and environmentally friendly.

The Seychelles proves a textbook example of what makes a location desirable, no matter how remote. Because of its location off Africa's northeast coast, it was long a holiday staple for Europeans while out of reach for Americans until a few years ago, when several airlines (including Ethiopian Airlines, Qatar Airways and Etihad Airways) stepped up service to the region. Fewer tourists and more unspoiled beaches make the long trip worth the effort, along with its spas, diving, boating, hiking and biking activities. On the cultural front, the Seychelles also has much going for it with its rich Creole heritage, encompassing influences from France, England, Portugal, India and several East African nations.

Everything Seychelles offers inspired Ian Fleming to plot the next phase of 007 James Bond's storied career in 1958. When not brainstorming inside his suite at the Northolme Hotel overlooking Beau Vallon Beach on Mahé, Fleming headed off on snorkeling

jaunts, jungle trail hikes and searches for Seychellois pirate legends and lore — all scenarios inspiring the stories filling his eighth book, *For Your Eyes Only*.

Today, Fleming's island base is the adults-only Hilton Seychelles Northolme Resort & Spa, the group's smallest luxury property. Besides the 007 Bar, other elements that would make Bond feel right at home include the African-influenced beach-chic décor in its 56 dwellings, the stunning main infinity pool and pieces by local artists lining the entire resort. Its location, 20 minutes from capital city Victoria and its port, makes jaunts to La Digue and Praslin islands and fishing and diving cruises a breeze. In addition to an on-site wedding concierge, Seychellois cuisine and ceremony/reception space for up to 50 people, the resort allows couples to design a wedding/honeymoon package to incorporate spa services, a bespoke activity itinerary and even helicopter tours and James Bond cruises.

Tahiti reigns as a well-established wedding/honeymoon destination thanks to its impressive selection of 5-star resorts with plush overwater bungalows and elaborate offers. Couples wanting to delve deeper into Polynesian culture and traditions, however, now have

ISLAND
SECLUSION:
Hilton Seychelles
Northolme Resort
& Spa overlooking
the ocean (top left),
pool (top right),
presidential villa
bathroom (bottom
left) and guestroom
(bottom right)

PHOTOS: © HILTON
SEYCHELLES NORTHOLME
RESORT AND SPA,
© ELYSE GLICKMAN





NATURAL
SETTINGS:
*The Marlborough
Lodge grounds (top),
and a Brudepikene
wedding in Norway
(bottom)*

PHOTOS: © THE
MARLBOROUGH LODGE,
© BRUDEPIKENE AS

*Couples-
focused media
and technology
company
XOGroup
reports one out
of every four
weddings staged
in 2017 were
destination
weddings, with
numbers still
rising in 2018.*



the option of staging their small wedding, elopement or honeymoon at one of the islands' Tahitian guesthouses, called pensions. This network of independently owned inns strips away the pomp and circumstance of the big resorts and replaces that with personalized, more familial experiences.

Advantages of this truly Tahitian journey include personal interactions with island residents, with some owners and on-site managers personally welcoming the couple and their immediate family into their "home." The hosts enjoy sitting down to meals with their guests and acting as guides on local excursions such as pearl diving, snorkeling, hiking and visiting vanilla plantations, along with other experiences unique to the immediate area.

The mountains, lakes, vineyards and temperate climate of New Zealand's South Island provide another definition of paradise, offering a wonderland for outdoor enthusiasts (it's the birthplace of bungee jumping), movie fans (as back lot for the *Lord of the Rings* series and film and television productions) and wine lovers. Marlborough Lodge, built into a Victorian-era convent, sits at the heart of this

splendor. Beyond the interesting ways it repurposed the original buildings, it offers a tailor-made destination wedding site with its photo-ready parklands and gardens, wine country sophistication and dramatic landscapes demanding exploration. Several recent upgrades — including a spa built into the old convent's chapel — all but guarantee memories will endure, like a good vintage.

The lodge can accommodate wedding parties of up to 40 guests, with overnight space for up to 20, including children 8 years and older. (Children of all ages are welcome with a buy-out of the property, or a family suite can be arranged in advance). Guests can tour the grounds with the lodge's head gardener to learn about its 154 native New Zealand trees and bushes and vineyards with four grape varietals. As Spring Creek runs through the property, guests can spot various birds, ducks and other indigenous wildlife while touring on foot or by bike.

Activities available through the concierge run the gamut from Marlborough Sounds Seafood cruises and winery tours to the Omaka Aviation Heritage Centre (home of movie director Peter Jackson's World War I aircraft and memorabilia collection); helicopter tours; kayaking, hiking and biking in Marlborough Sounds; fly-fishing on the Wairu River; and whale- and dolphin-watching tours. The wedding feast itself is a customizable celebration of the South Island's bounty, with products from area farms and seafood from Marlborough Sounds paired with the region's world-famous Sauvignon Blanc and other wines.



WEDDING PARTY:
Rancho San Lucas reception

PHOTOS: © RANCHO SAN LUCAS

While Iceland and Canada gain traction among couples favoring cooler climates, Norway just may prove the next great wedding getaway — especially given its consistent high rankings in the World Happiness Report’s annual list of the Happiest Countries (landing at the No. 2 spot in 2018, with Iceland, Canada and New Zealand also placing in the top 10). Companies such as Brudepikene (meaning “the bridesmaids”), based just outside of Oslo in Drammen, specialize in custom weddings using the prodigious palette of Norway.

“The entire country is our workspace,” says cofounder and planner Ann Kristin Nissen. “Those liking a city location will choose Oslo, while others will prefer a natural setting on the western coast or in the northern part of the country with the mountains and fjords. We have a basic package which includes our fee only. From there, we can plan the rest of the wedding based on the clients’ interests and special requests.”

Storjford Hotel, overlooking the Storjford and Sunnmøre Alps, is simultaneously luxurious and down-to-earth, making it ideal for an active honeymoon — and if you buy out the entire hotel, a Scandinavian-style wedding. While Stranda Ski Resort lies minutes from the hotel, a cross-country skiing or snowshoeing adventure can start right at its front door. Other activities include private excursions to Hjørundfjord and majestic Geirangerfjord and scenic walks to Hautua. During the summer months, the hotel makes kayaks and bikes available to guests. Nissen also recommends Villa Åmot, an all-inclusive property accommodating up to 23 people whose owners are known for their personal interaction with guests.

With a little research, couples preferring a North American destination will find gems on par with their overseas counterparts in terms of natural settings and original concepts. Cornman Farms, for example, sports an amalgam of English and American country charm 30 minutes outside of Ann Arbor, Michigan (overseen by Chef Kieron Hales, whose résumé includes cooking for British royalty and U.S. presidents). Red Mountain Resort, meanwhile, offers a Peruvian *q’ero ayni despacho* ceremony to accompany a traditional wedding, vow renewal or elopement against Utah’s fabled Red Rocks. While wedding and honeymoon packages abound in Cabo San Lucas, Grand Solmar at Rancho San Lucas (opened early 2018) brings the region’s abundance of outdoor pursuits, luxuriant spa experiences, cultural activities and chic beach house aesthetic to a more exclusive setting 30 minutes from Cabo’s buzzy center.

Rancho San Lucas’ earthy hues and contemporary furnishings harmonize with the shoreline and desert terrain. Individual suites and villas are quietly opulent, with marble floors, spa-style bathrooms with Jacuzzi tub, fully appointed kitchens and terraces framing the ocean and beach views. The ambience also ensures a rehearsal dinner at Anica and the ceremony and reception will be tasteful and lively. Before and after the big day, the party can enjoy the unspoiled desert and sea with nearby ATV tours, fishing cruises, kayaking, wave runner rentals, stand-up paddleboarding and surfing lessons and diving at Pelican Rock — even a variety of extreme sports activities including bungee jumping, zip-lining, parasailing and fly boarding.

