

Planning Guide

Beverly Clark answers brides' most common questions about destination I dos.

Q We don't have a big budget for our destination wedding. Where should we get married?

A Go where the dollar is stronger. You'll find great deals all over Latin America, including Mexico, Costa Rica and Argentina. Puerto Rico is also popular among brides and grooms. Additionally, all-inclusive properties in the Caribbean, such as Sandals and Elite Island Resorts, draw couples with the promise of no hidden fees and taxes. Or opt for a destination wedding closer to home. This way, you still get out of town but can cut down on transportation costs. Think San Francisco, New York, Key West, Miami or even British Columbia. Vegas, too, is a favorite spot to tie the knot without breaking the bank. More budget-saving tips:

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TRAVEL OFF-SEASON Plane fares and hotel rates are significantly higher during prime season, so consider having your wedding at a less popular time of year. Even booking during the "shoulder" season, a few weeks before and after peak season, makes a big difference.

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WAIT TO BOOK Flexible couples willing to take risks can save a lot by waiting to book the venue and vendors until three to four months before their event. Venues with openings will give you much better rates if you hold off.

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MARRY MIDWEEK Who says you have to marry on a Saturday or Sunday? Get hitched on a Tuesday and take advantage of midweek discounts from vendors and hotels.

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KNOW YOUR PRIORITIES There are always things you can skip and still have a fabulous wedding. Make a priority list of what you can and can't do without.

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STRIKE A DEAL Resorts and vendors need your business more than ever, so take advantage of the recession by asking for group rates and other discounts. If a venue or vendor won't reduce its prices, at least be sure to get an upgrade.

Q We want to marry somewhere in Mexico. Should we visit our destination before the wedding day?

A Most couples don't have the opportunity to, whether it's a money issue or time constraint, or both. And still, most get hitched without a hitch. Today most resorts and wedding venues have a planner on staff to oversee all the important details, including hiring vendors and negotiating rates—just be sure you find someone you trust and feel comfortable with. Thanks to the web, you can do a majority of the research online to get a feel for the place and the options available. With that said, I always recommend couples make the trip if they do have the time and money, especially if you're the type that likes to have full control. This way you can explore the resort(s), taste the menus and drinks you plan to serve and meet the planner and vendors in person.

Q We're arranging a weeklong wedding getaway for 40 people. Are we obligated to pay for everything for our guests during that week?

A No, you're not. While wedding guests should not have to pay for their meals at the reception or rehearsal dinner, destination wedding attendees are responsible for their own hotel accommodation and travel expenses, including plane tickets and cab fares. They also pay for any activities they sign up for on their own. Now, if you invite your guest to an organized event aside from the wedding reception and rehearsal dinner—be it a party or an excursion—you should foot the bill. In general, provide lots of economical options for your guests, and particularly for your bridal party. Check for block rates, group discounts and other ways to help family and friends make the trip.

Q Is it best to go for one of our resort's wedding packages?

A On one hand, it relieves stress from having to plan every single detail yourself and is often more financially sound. You will likely have a wedding planner included in your deal. And if you arrange many of your functions at one place, you can probably negotiate some freebies and nice discounts. On the other hand, if you're looking to host a one-of-a-kind event with special menus, your own decor and

lots of unique extras, go à la carte. Many couples opt for something in between: a resort package with à la carte possibilities. That way you can have your cake and eat it, too.

Q Should we have a gift registry for our destination wedding? How do we announce it?

A You can always register for gifts, but I recommend not including gift registry info on your invitation. People always find a way to locate where you're registered. And you can always ask a friend or family member to spread the word—and to let guests know not to bring the gifts all the way to the wedding location, if avoidable. As an alternative to a traditional registry, consider a honeymoon registry, where guests help pay for anything honeymoon related, from activities and meals to airfare and lodging. Or suggest that guests donate to a great cause on your behalf.