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If you're going abroad to marry, here's what you need to know

With the spiralling costs of Hong Kong weddings, more couples are opting to wed overseas. From the best exotic locations to keeping it legal, we ask experts how to get the most out of tying the knot on foreign soil

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A bride throws her bouquet during a ceremony at Sri Panwa Resort, Phuket, Thailand.
Photo: Wainwright Weddings

Getting married in an intimate tropical island setting, surrounded by close family and friends, was the obvious option for Felice and Jacques Marshall, who also wanted to avoid the spiralling costs of a Hong Kong-based wedding, which now amounts to an average of HK\$300,000.

"We really wanted a wedding that was different," says Felice, who has lived in Hong Kong with her husband for seven years. "We have friends from across the world, and the warm weather, beautiful location and it being less expensive than having a wedding in Hong Kong were all an attraction."

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The couple, who wed on the Thai island of Phuket, are one of many choosing to say their vows abroad. And with the trend rising at a rapid pace, organising the perfect destination wedding couldn't be easier.

"One of the great things about a destination wedding is that it brings everyone together on an adventure," says Julian Abram Wainwright, who launched destination wedding photography company Wainwright Weddings in 2008. "At a city wedding, it's all over in a blink of an eye, and often the couple has just said a quick hello and thank you to most guests."

Felice and Jacques Marshall enjoyed a three-day celebration to mark their marriage in Phuket.

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Avoiding "family politics" and cutting down the guest list to those who truly matter are also common reasons Jeanette Skelton's clients cite for marrying abroad. "They want close friends and families to celebrate with, rather than having to invite those people they don't really want there," adds the founder of Luxury Events Phuket, whose clientele mainly hail from Hong Kong.

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Throw into the mix the fact that it provides a holiday for all, extending the one-day occasion to a three-day celebration, and the Marshalls were sold on renting out a private villa in Phuket for four days to cater for the 68 guests they invited.

Hong Kong's lack of outdoor space has also led to couples setting their sights on tropical locations, with beaches, sprawling paddies, luxury resorts and isolated villas with swimming pools all being popular options for Skelton's clientele. "There is a different energy among guests," she adds. "Everyone has made an effort to be there, and they're all there because they want to be there."

The spectacular setting of Angkor Wat is popular with couples. Photo: Wainwright Weddings

"With a myriad exotic locations so close to Hong Kong, couples can find a perfect destination to fit their personality, as well as their budget," says wedding planner Sonya Yeung, of Hong Kong-based Bliss Creations, which specialises in locations across Asia-Pacific.

Bali and Thailand have long been hot spots for those looking to get married off the map. But recent years have seen more couples looking further afield. Countries such as Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, which are developing at a rapid rate, are rising in popularity as couples become more adventurous and creative with their plans.

Yeung has also noticed a trend in couples wanting to incorporate local quirks into their ceremonies, such as using Balinese decor or hosting a welcome dinner at Cambodia's Angkor Wat. "Weddings in Southeast Asia allow for a lot of unique traditions, venues and activities that Hong Kong does not," she says.

"Destination weddings can give couples an exotic, luxurious wedding at an affordable price," notes Wainwright, and cutting down on costs is a major factor for brides-to-be. While engaged couples can choose to splash the cash or tighten the purse strings, even a luxurious destination wedding in many places across Southeast Asia can cost only a third to a half of the average spent in Hong Kong.

"Destination weddings can be more budget friendly than traditional Hong Kong weddings, allowing for the couples to get more bang for their buck," adds Yeung. Common cost-cutting measures include a smaller number of guests, less decor and cheaper food, drink, flowers, entertainment and venue hire.

A bridal party prepare for a ceremony at InterContinental Sun Peninsula Resort, Danang, Vietnam. Photo: Wainwright Weddings

Recruiting a wedding planner with expertise in specific destinations is highly recommended. "If we didn't have a wedding planner, it would have been very difficult to organise from afar," says Felice, who visited the venue initially before handing over all the fine details to Luxury Events Phuket, which were nailed down via email and Skype.

Getting wed abroad may seem romantic but couples can forget there is a legal element for a marriage to be valid. "A religious ceremony on the beach will not mean that the parties have legally married each other," advises Rita Ku, partner at Withers law firm. "By far the safest thing to do is to either legally register the marriage before the destination wedding or soon after the couple's return."

Marriages held abroad are usually recognised in Hong Kong if they comply with the law of the country in which the wedding took place. However, each country has its own laws and for a marriage to be valid, "the procedure must be right", adds Ku. For example, to be legally wed in Thailand, the couple must commit to each other publicly before a registrar, have this recorded by the registrar and the declaration of marriage filed at the local District Office.

With a little more planning and preparation, tying the knot away from home can bring with it a wealth of unforgettable memories without burning a hole in newlyweds' pockets. "We'd highly recommend it," says Jacques. "It's a magical and special celebration, and one your guests will never forget."

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