



Saying “I do” to destination weddings

It’s an auspicious year for Chinese nuptials, and tying the knot overseas is now in vogue

SINGAPORE

Linda Haden

WEDDINGS Holding a destination wedding is a rather new phenomenon for Singaporeans, but the trend is gaining traction as more couples eschew traditional large-scale weddings in favour of more intimate, personalised affairs, said local planners.

“With more couples striving to hold their weddings in unique and different settings (instead of) the standard ones proffered by hotels and restaurants in Singapore, there is certainly room for growth,” said Kim Tay, managing director, Wedding Concierge.

While the number of Singaporeans celebrating their weddings abroad is still relatively small, with wedding planners handling no more than five to 10 nuptials each year, various planners that *TTG Asia* spoke to observed that interest is markedly higher this year compared to 2010 and 2011.

“Enquiries about destination weddings have doubled for us so far this year as more couples, especially experienced travellers, are more willing to spend big to make their dream weddings a reality,” said Gordon Ang, owner and director of Wedding Matters. He added that the global economic slowdown had not dented demand in any way.

Olga Jastrebkova, owner of Guinone Weddings, remarked that the spike in demand for destination weddings could also be partly credited to the fact that more Singaporean couples now paid for their own weddings, and hence, were less obliged to “plan weddings dictated by their parents’ whims

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and desires, and were now free to have a wedding that they really want”.

However, Ang pointed out that only a fifth of destination wedding enquiries his firm received would translate into actual weddings, as some couples were put off by the huge outlay, which could range from S\$30,000 (US\$23,775) to S\$50,000, depending on the venue, entertainment, catering and number of guests.

“There’s a misconception that weddings held abroad are less expensive than hosting one in Singapore. In fact, it can end up costing the same, but the prime difference is that the wedding will be organised to a couple’s exact requirements, and wedding parties are usually much smaller, comprising about 30 people or so versus 1,000 at traditional

weddings in Singapore,” said Jastrebkova.

Bali, Phuket and the Maldives are the top destinations for tying the knot abroad for Singaporeans, while Taiwan, Malaysia and Sri Lanka are climbing the popularity stakes. Most couples tend to avoid international chains when holding a wedding abroad, instead opting for independent properties, particularly villas. Couples typically make accommodation and flight bookings themselves, with the wedding planner taking care of all other details.

It used to be more common for a Singaporean-foreigner couple to engage Singapore-based planners to organise a wedding overseas, but this profile is evolving. “A decade ago, couples consisting of two Singaporeans were wary (about marrying abroad), but now, with photo shoots taking place in far-flung destinations such as Australia and Greece, more are opening up to the idea of a destination wedding,” said Jastrebkova.

HONEYMOONS Europe still ranks top for Singaporean honeymooners. Steven Lee, managing director, Just Travel, which customises honeymoons for around 600 couples a year, said France, Italy and Switzerland were primary destinations Singaporean lovebirds usually visited as part of a multi-destination itinerary. Turkey, Sri Lanka and India are emerging honeymoon destinations. Packages generally cost around S\$2,800 per person, and couples prefer three- to five-star properties, depending on the destination.



Scenic Xinanjiang River, Hangzhou

Hangzhou Tourism

TAIWAN

Glenn Smith

WEDDINGS

The number of weddings held by Taiwanese is expected to dip in 2012, following a boom in marriages in 2011.

Last year was deemed doubly auspicious to get hitched in Taiwan: not only did it precede the 'dragon year', it also marked the Republic of China's 100th founding anniversary, which, in Chinese belief, connotes enduring love. Some 165,327 Taiwanese couples tied the knot last year, a 19.1 per cent increase from 138,819 in 2010, based on Ministry of Interior statistics.

"The centennial (anniversary) was the real reason for the jump in marriages last year," said Jackie Shen, executive vice president, Hsihung Travel. He downplayed the allure of a 'dragon baby' might have had in last year's

surge in marriages, as fertility rates have been plummeting in Taiwan, which has among the world's lowest at 0.89.

And while travelling overseas for honeymoons may be the norm for Taiwanese, destination weddings remain a rarity. "Only celebrities can afford it," said Antonio Liao, president, Phoenix Tours.

However, Guam tourism promoters are wooing Taiwanese couples with affordable hotel packages that include the (wedding) ceremony in a local chapel, said Vincent Lin, CEO, Star Travel. His company has booked Guam wedding parties of up to 10 pax.

HONEYMOONS With Taiwanese marrying later, couples have plenty of cash to blow on honeymoons. Europe is an easy sale, said Liao, as newlyweds "see honeymoons as a once-in-a-life-

time event and Europe is heavily promoted (in Taiwan)".

Pauline Lu, head of Phoenix Tours' European division, added that Italy (Rome, Florence and Venice) and France (Paris) were preferred by her clients last year.

In Asia, Bali and Boracay are the most popular, but this also depends on the personalities of couples, said Lin. "Hotels with spas are a big attraction, but in winter, that could be a hot spring resort in snowy Hokkaido or a South-east Asian island resort," he added.

That said, Bali remains a perennial favourite for Taiwanese honeymooners, said Andy Yu, director of special interest tour department, Lion Travel Service. "Alila Villas Uluwatu, which opened in 2010, has been asked for most frequently since well-known Taiwanese celebrity (Aimee Sun) held her wedding ceremony there."

CHINA

Patricia Wee

WEDDINGS

Destination weddings are still a novel concept to the Chinese, who

prefer to hold their weddings locally and seldom go overseas.

"The whole idea of holding a wedding outside of one's hometown or city and flying guests overseas is not popular," said Rick Xie, office manager, Country Holidays.

Overseas weddings, however, are not uncommon for wealthy Chinese families. Charles Wang, director of Royal Light Travel, said: "Guam has lots of white churches and the Pacific Islands Club is popular among young Chinese who want a themed wedding." Last year, he organised four weddings in Guam.

Such wedding packages cost about RMB100,000 (US\$15,863) each couple, who travel with an entourage of relatives and friends and book between 20 and 25 hotel rooms.

Another popular destination for weddings is Boracay, made famous by Mandarin singer Fish Leong who held her wedding there. "The young generation likes to follow such stars," said Wang. It costs about RMB80,000 a couple to hold a wedding in Boracay.

HONEYMOONS Travelling abroad for honeymoons, likewise, has not taken off among Chinese newlyweds.

Xie said: "For Shanghainese, Sanya is still the number one honeymoon destination as it's nearer to home, followed by Hangzhou for its beautiful environment and the lower cost.

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Yunnan is also popular, besides Phuket and Bali."

VariArts Travel Group, CEO and founder, Lin Xu, lamented the lack of product variation for honeymoon packages in the Chinese market, which favours Europe as a honeymoon destination due to its romantic associations.

On the other hand, the growing availability of cheap flights and Chinese-speaking ground-handlers has upped the appeal of Asian destinations such as the Philippines, Cambodia and Malaysia. Beach resorts and urban luxury hotels are top choices in these countries.

Xu said: "People are spending more as their demands grow more sophisticated." Prices vary greatly depending on destinations, but could reach six figures if extra services are requested, he added.

High-end consumers prefer a private tour with out-of-the-ordinary experiences, such as a castle stay in southern France, a candlelight dinner in a wild safari camp and a private yacht cruise. Such trips are often accompanied by local photographers.



From left: an island off Phuket; tropical beaches are popular destination wedding locations

Christian Devereux

Roger Kirby

HONG KONG

Deborah Cornfield

WEDDINGS

More Hong Kong couples are expected to tie the knot in the 'dragon year', with wedding and event planners seeing a twofold increase in enquiries and confirmed bookings.

Sonya Yeung, creative director, Bliss Creations, said couples were starting wedding preparations much earlier, from a year to 18 months in advance, to secure venues and services on auspicious dates.

Most weddings of Hong Kongers are still held locally due to the sheer guest volume, as "many couples have large-scale weddings and a wedding abroad

is logistically challenging," she explained.

Kim Williams-Waaijer, chief wedding planner, FETE Hong Kong, pointed out that local couples were more open to having destination weddings though, especially for those who grew up in the West, and they were seeking out unconventional venues. She said: "Couples prefer uniqueness. One thing that's important is the memory; the more unique, the better remembered."

There is a growing interest in destination weddings, and couples are opting for exotic, tropical destinations such as Bali, Phuket and the Maldives, noted Yeung.

She said choices vary year to year, but Bali was a current fa-

vourite due to recent movies.

HONEYMOONS Katemagg Chau, director, Katemagg Event and Wedding, noticed that couples were increasingly planning their weddings in conjunction with their honeymoons.

She said: "Emerging locations such as Vietnam and Sanya are proving to be a draw among Hong Kong couples because of their proximity and value. With the massive resort development underway, especially in Sanya, couples are spoiled for choice."

She observed that although honeymoon budgets were usually much bigger than holiday ones, in light of economic uncertainty, couples were budgeting and spending wisely.

Romantic getaways in exotic locales



Grand Hôtel de Bordeaux & Spa, France

This historic 17th century property, which recently reopened following a glamorous makeover, caters to wine-loving honeymooners. Nestled in the heart of Bordeaux, many renowned wineries lie in the vicinity – including Château Haut Brion, Château Lafite Rothschild and Château Latour – while the hotel offers a wine concierge service highlighting oenological experiences such as tastings, wine dinners, vineyard tours and sommelier master-class. Guests can also savour French gourmet seafood at

the Michelin-star restaurant Le Pressoir d'Argent, indulge in a massage in a private couple's treatment room at Les Bains de Léa, or relax in comfort in one of the 150 guest rooms and suites decorated by acclaimed Parisian designer Jacques Garcia. www.ghbordeaux.com



La Résidence d'Angkor, Cambodia

Situated in the ancient city of Siem Reap, this Orient-Express luxury retreat is ideal for newlyweds seeking a honeymoon experience in a location steeped in history, culture and exotic landscapes. Set by the riverside, the 62-room property is just a short drive from Angkor Wat, making it a convenient base for exploring the UNESCO World Heritage Site. The hotel is offering a Honeymoon Package that includes limousine airport transfers, champagne on arrival, daily buffet breakfast, and 'just for two'

experiences, such as a three-course Khmer dinner by candlelight, one traditional bath and massage treatment in the Kong Kea Spa and a private meditation session with Buddhist monks. Rates start at US\$325 a night. www.residencedangkor.com