



The Out of TOWNERS

GRAB YOUR MATE, GET THE JET FUELLED AND HEAD OUT OF HONG KONG FOR A DESTINATION WEDDING THAT WILL LEAVE YOU FEELING A MILLION MILES AWAY

HONG KONG MAY HAVE loosened its grip a bit when it comes to where couples can marry, but sometimes nothing brings two people closer than jetting off to a faraway land. The city is only a hop-skip-and-a-flight away from some of the most romantic spots on the planet, but no matter how dreamy Bali and Phuket are, celebrating your wedding in a spot you've visited for the past 10 Golden Weeks just doesn't feel as special as, say, travelling 16 hours to Santa Barbara or 12 to London.

Choosing the location of the wedding is one of the most important pre-nuptial decisions and is one of the few instances in which both parties have equally strong

opinions. Destination weddings often provide a much-needed sense of escape from the daily grind, especially for couples who have spent the past year immersed in the ever-expanding wedding to-do list. Travelling abroad for a ceremony engenders added excitement and contributes to a sense that the two of you are eloping, even if you're headed to a 500-person affair.

Destination wedding planner Sonya Yeung, creative director at Bliss Creations, recommends planning a foreign affair "at least six to eight months ahead of time, as popular destinations get busy and booking your preferred venue and date can get tricky if [it gets] too late. Obviously

the earlier you start the better, as you want to know that the important guests are able to come, everyone can book their time off and that flights are available."

While Paris, New York and Venice are easy choices when it comes to instant romance, the world is packed with less conspicuous getaways that often feel much more personal. For those in the know, hidden amid the foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains in Montecito, California, is the San Ysidro Ranch, a Rosewood Resort.

The San Ysidro Ranch was established in 1893 and is among California's most exclusive and historic resorts. The Ranch has played host to myriad notables including Audrey Hepburn, Bing Crosby and Winston Churchill and is beloved for its awe-inspiring natural beauty, fabled heritage and bar-none pampering. The resort's gardens make an incredible spot for a wedding ceremony. In fact, Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier were married at San Ysidro, and JFK and Jackie chose the ranch as their honeymoon spot. Above all, the San Ysidro Ranch is discreet, private and intimate – everything a destination wedding should be.

The San Ysidro Ranch recently underwent a US\$150 million restoration, courtesy of Ty Warner, and comprises 40 charming bungalows that wind along a hillside creek



Asia de Cuba restaurant in London's St Martins Lane Hotel. Below: The renovated Kennedy Cottage boasts three fireplaces. Opposite: San Ysidro Ranch in Montecito, California

a sunbathing deck. For golfers, the ranch partners with three area courses: Montecito Country Club, Rancho San Marcos and Sandpiper Golf Club. If you'd prefer to stay indoors, book an in-room session with one of the resort's spa therapists.

The San Ysidro Ranch's in-house restaurant, The Stonehouse, has been renovated and is wedding-reception friendly. The restaurant is led by Chef John Trotta, who dishes up regional Californian cuisine prepared with a palette of herbs and vegetables fresh picked from the chef's garden.

Located in a 19th-century citrus packinghouse, The Stonehouse includes a lounge with a full bar and a separate dining room with a quaint fireplace and creek-side views. Make sure to snag tables on the ocean view deck – a wood-burning fireplace and heated stone floors make the spot comfortable all year round.

On the other side of the pond, in London, is St Martins Lane Hotel – a chic boutique hotel from Ian Schrager and designed by Philippe Starck. As luck would have it, St Martins Lane recently received its wedding licence so ceremonies can be performed on the premises.

Located in the perpetually cool Covent Garden neighbourhood, St Martins Lane is distinguished from modern hotels by its lack of gimmickry – it doesn't put on airs because it doesn't need to. A seven-storey, 204-room hotel, St Martins Lane was conceived as an urban resort and embodies Schrager's "Hotel as Theatre" philosophy. Starck and Schrager's goal was to create an environment so distinctive and magical that it transcends design and instead focuses on fun – an important ingredient in any wedding.

and tree-lined paths. Built in classic cottage style, the guestrooms are individually decorated with ultra plush, ultra homey interiors. All accommodations have fireplaces or stoves; most have king-size beds and private patios with hot tubs and outdoor showers.

For honeymooners, make sure to book the Kennedy Cottage, named for the iconic American couple who spent their honeymoon tucked away inside. The 1,800 sq ft cottage has been completely renovated, but it has not lost any of its charm. The cottage now features two master bedrooms, two oversized bathrooms with radiant-heat floors, three masonry fireplaces and a spacious living room. Both master bedrooms, as well as the living and dining areas, open onto an expansive deck with a private hot tub and outdoor rain shower that overlook the Pacific Ocean.

The resort's natural surrounds and unbeatable Cali weather present a variety of outdoor activities including 27.5km of beautiful hiking and walking trails, lush flower gardens, a working organic chef's garden and a heated swimming pool with



The restaurants in St Martins Lane include the iconic Asia de Cuba, which highlights a series of majestic “art columns” each displaying a unique composition. Asia de Cuba is overseen by Jeffrey Chodorow and serves the creative Asian-Latino fare that has garnered a cult following in New York’s Morgans Hotel and Mondrian in LA.

The Back Room, an all-white space constructed from imported Yugoslavian marble, is separated into two equal sized rooms that work well for both the ceremony and the reception and can easily accommodate up to 300 people. The space includes a wall of bubbling water designed in the style of famed performance artist Robert Wilson and both rooms can be customised to please the wedding couple’s preferences.

Heading over to Central Europe, we come to the Alchemist Grand Hotel and Spa in Prague. While St Martins Lane aims for understated, the Alchemist touts its rich baroque furnishings and over-the-top Euro finery.

The hotel is a historic retreat that is just steps from the fabled Charles Bridge and is a revival of the Dum u Ježíška, a legendary landmark from the 16th century. The Alchemist is decked out in old-world Italian style and features 47 guestrooms, seven junior suites and 13 prestige suites. Honeymooners take notice, the one bedroom, 865 sq ft Alchemist suite boasts a 90 sq ft private terrace for a little *al fresco* canoodling and a 240 sq ft bathroom with an enormous tub.

The hotel’s multiple frescoes and vaulted

most demanding bridezilla. Located on the first floor with ample natural daylight and a spacious terrace, the Crystal Room holds up to 100 people – you may want to keep the guest list for Prague strictly VIP-only.

While the charm and grandeur of Europe work for some couples, others just want to get their feet wet and sandy on a tropical island honeymoon. Club Med Kani in the Maldives is an easy, breezy spot that never disappoints beachcombers.

Club Med’s all-inclusive holidays provide everything – and just about anything – for newlyweds. The resort’s no fuss, no muss attitude is a welcome breather from the pressure cooker of pre-wedding planning. In addition to three daily gourmet meals, all day snacking, entertainment and sporting



Club Med Kani in the Maldives provides everything for newlyweds

The guestrooms are understated and unfussy and won’t overwhelm an already overwhelmed pre-nuptial party. The rooms feature “living artwork” such as floor-to-ceiling glass windows with panoramic views of London and bustling Covent Garden. For an added touch of flair, a first-of-its-kind interactive light installation enables guests to light the room to suit their mood with a full spectrum of colours. It’s akin to the much-ballyhooed light therapy, which may be an unexpected boon for a stressed-out bride or groom.

Many of the suites also offer beautifully landscaped private patio gardens and outdoor teak furniture – an ideal spot for private wedding photos. The gardens are home to a colourful array of flora including climbing hydrangea, clematis, white camellia trees, flowing ivy and freshly planted perennials. The whole scene is reminiscent of the south of France, but you don’t have to leave the comforts of the city. Order an inside/outside spa treatment or massage and it’ll be like your own personal Eden.

ceilings are nothing if not romantic. Modern luxuries such as plasma-screen TVs and DVD players are cleverly combined with 19th-century paintings and sculptures, and the house boasts fantastic views of Prague’s renowned golden spires.

The hotel’s Escotica Spa offers couple-friendly private treatment rooms where guests are treated to a range of services from Balinese massages to avocado wraps. Escotica even offers a pre-wedding spa package that includes a body scrub, body wrap, luxury bath, and body, face and foot massages. Just try to feel stressed after the therapists have worked their magic.

The expansive Aquarius restaurant is an ideal set-up for a reception and, depending on your tastes, the décor is plush enough for a royal wedding. The restaurant serves an eclectic array of Mediterranean cuisine as well as traditional Czech dishes, if you’d prefer to go native.

As for the ceremony, the hotel’s new Crystal Room is fully equipped to handle the

activities, the Kani honeymoon suite packages – available through October – also include a bottle of champagne and fruit basket, a specially arranged romantic candle-lit dinner and a two-and-a-half-hour spa session, among other things.

The Kani Club Med sits in the Indian Ocean on the island of Kanifinholu, and the resort is home to quiet, white-sand beaches, stilted lagoon suites and beach villas. For active lovebirds, the resort can arrange island explorations via speedboat and hydroplane and offshore scuba diving and sailing. For couples looking for less active participation, sit back, grab a cocktail and enjoy the paradise views with the love of your life. ■

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