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How to have the best exotic beach wedding: tips from a destination wedding planner to avoid disaster


Getting married on a tropical beach sounds like a dream, but without good planning, it can be a nightmare. Destination wedding planner Sonya Yeung shares her tips for the perfect overseas occasion.

Topic | Asia travel



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Photographs of destination weddings have a carefree, fairy-tale feel to them. A bride-to-be may long for the wind in her hair and the sand between her toes as her freshly minted husband kisses her on an idyllic beach. But a lot of planning, not to mention expense, goes into creating dream nuptials – and there are a number of possible pitfalls to watch out for.

One of the big draws of tying the knot overseas is the promise of an exotic location. Sonya Yeung, founder of the destination wedding company Bliss Creations, says her clients are often looking for something out of the ordinary, with a holiday feel.

“It might be more unique than if you get married in the same city as all your friends, seeing the same venues repeatedly. Everyone wants a Pinterest wedding,” says Yeung.

One downside of out-of-town weddings is that there will inevitably be some guests who cannot attend. Yeung estimates the dropout rate at about 30 per cent, depending on the time of year and whether the event coincides with holidays.



A beach wedding in an exotic location may seem carefree and idyllic; however, there are some pitfalls to avoid.

British-born, Hong Kong-based Lisa Pang got married last year in Bali. She said that fewer than half the 70 guests invited made it to her big day, citing cost as the key factor.

“My mum and dad came, but a lot of family and friends in England did not come because it was out of their budget. I was OK with that, it’s a long way for people to come. For many of the ones who came it was their first time in Asia and they turned it into part of a holiday, which was great,” says Pang.



Sonya Yeung (left) and her husband, Shaun, were married in Boracay.

A recent survey in the United States found that 42 per cent of 1,502 respondents said they would miss a destination wedding because of the cost of travel. What's more, 37.2 per cent of people thought it selfish to expect guests to spend their money and holiday time to attend the couple's big day in a distant land.

“In Hong Kong we are used to popping here and there for the weekend, it's part of the Hong Kong lifestyle for some people,” says Yeung. She says that, for the bride and groom, a destination wedding is often more cost effective than one at home.

Things do not always go to plan when you are a long way from home, however. Hong Kong couple Greg and Fung were in their mid-20s when they got hitched in 1994. They liked the idea of beach nuptials and found a contact for Reverend MC Hansen, from Affordable Weddings of Hawaii, in *The Rough Guide to Hawaii*.



Some guests may be unable to attend a wedding in an exotic location because of the cost of getting there.

“The morning of the wedding was spent running around trying to get a measles jab for Fung, a weirdly sexist legal requirement we had to fulfil before we could do the deed,” says Greg (Hawaii has a measles epidemic, and infected pregnant women can pass the disease to their unborn children, so women must be vaccinated).

Having left it to the last minute, time was tight, creating a level of stress that erupted into a huge argument in the picturesque gardens of the Honolulu Government building with a bemused group of Hawaiians looking on, says Greg.

The couple kept it a very intimate affair and the witness was the reverend's photographer. "He took the most underwhelming wedding photos you've ever seen. Thankfully we went through with it and 25 years on we're still yelling at each other in scenic places," says Greg.



Wedding planners try to prepare for the unexpected. Photo: Shutterstock

Being prepared for the unexpected is part of the package that a wedding planner provides. Yeung recalls a wedding she organised in Phuket, Thailand, in December. Despite it being the dry season, just as the guests were about to leave the marquee for a dinner on the lawn there was a massive downpour that lasted over an hour.

"We kept all the guests under the marquee and plied them with alcohol. There's nothing you can do, you've got to take it in your stride and keep it lighthearted. The couple made the best of it," says Yeung.

Phuket, she says, is one of the most popular wedding destinations. It is not cheap, but couples can expect to spend less than they would in Hong Kong. Other wedding hotspots in Thailand include Chiang Mai and Koh Samui – all with direct flights and easy access from Hong Kong. Bali is also a hot ticket, and she says the Philippines is undersold.

“People often overlook the Philippines, but it’s easily accessible and affordable. Palawan does not get the attention it deserves. And there are other gems, like Cambodia,” says Yeung.

Going further afield, she says Fiji has plenty of beautiful locations for idyllic weddings, as well as direct flights from Hong Kong. She also mentions Perth, Australia, but advises clients that dream locations change and what might have been good one year isn’t always available the following year.

Yeung tied the knot on a beach in Boracay in the Philippines in 2016 and, as part of the beach wedding package, an elaborate sandcastle was made bearing her name and that of her husband, Shaun. Last year Boracay was forced to close to visitors for six months as a result of overtourism.



When Yeung was married in Boracay in 2016, a sand sculpture was made as part of the celebrations. These are now banned on the island, which was closed for six months last year.

“We went back to Boracay recently with our son and there are now a lot of restrictions about how much space you can take up on the beach, you cannot eat or drink on the beach, and they’ve banned [wedding] sandcastles,” says Yeung.

Yeung says clients tend to be reluctant to try new destinations, preferring to opt for places that are tried and tested. One of the most beautiful ceremonies she arranged was eight years ago at Angkor Wat, Cambodia, a Buddhist blessing in the temple followed by dinner at the foot of the temple.

“Since then there have been more regulations put in place to limit the number of tourists going in and being considerate to the local customs,” says Yeung.



My mum and dad came, but a lot of family and friends in England did not come because it was out of their budget. I was OK with that, it's a long way for people to come
Hong Kong-based Lisa Pang was married in Bali and half of her invited guests couldn't make it



Beach weddings top many people's list of dream locations, but they are not for everyone. Yeung recalls a bride-to-be who had her heart set on a seaside location, but her groom did not want to get sand in his shoes. Nor was he keen on the suggestion of flip-flops.

“They compromised and had their ceremony on the beach and dinner on the lawn. You need to be able to cooperate with your partner; they were off to a good start,” says Yeung.

Instagram wedding shots may look heavenly, but they are not always practical. If you have ever seen a picture of a bride and groom in a hot-air balloon, her long white dress tumbling out of the wicker basket, it was most likely a staged photo shoot than an actual wedding.



The reality of a wedding photo in a hot-air balloon may not be as romantic as the idea. Photo: Shutterstock

“Sometimes the vision supersedes the practicality. Hot air balloons take off at about 5am or 6am, which means you need to get up at 3am to do hair and make-up. I have to tell brides that sometimes balloons come crashing down, you could be a bride tumbled over. And they’ll say, ‘Oh, I did not think of that’,” says Yeung.

Regardless of where in the world you choose to tie the knot, it is important to find out in advance whether the ceremony will be considered legal. If not, you may well want to have a quiet civil wedding first. That paperwork is fairly easy in Hong Kong, where you can either do it at a marriage registry office or have a civil celebrant come to your home.

Wedding planner Sonya Yeung’s six tips for a destination wedding

1. Bring appropriate footwear and attire; you do not want to be wearing stilettos on a beach or lawn.
2. Choose a place that has some personal significance for you.
3. Think about the time of year in your desired location. The dry season in Bali is May to July, but it's October to February for much of the rest of Asia.
4. Hire someone who is familiar with the location to help you plan your wedding.
5. Be prepared to be flexible about expectations and forgiving about different levels of service.
6. Keep a sense of humour. Things might not always go according to plan.

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