

Destination: Happily Ever After

By Pamela Jacobs

Destination Weddings are more popular than ever, with thousands and thousands of couples deciding to combine their wedding day with travel, and say “I do” away from home, in a vacation atmosphere. Gone are the days when the only choices for weddings were a banquet hall (often referred to as a “wedding factory”) or a country club. Nowadays, brides and grooms want more, and want their guests to truly enjoy the experience. We’ve searched the options, and chosen five of the best tropical destination wedding spots. Each is in a different but equally wonderful place, and each spot guarantees luxury, paradise, and an ideal beginning to the rest of your lives together. Pick one of these, and your guests will be thanking you for years to come.

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HAWKS CAY, FLORIDA KEYS

If you're looking for a decidedly Florida Keys feel for your festivities, this is the definitive place to have that, and more. Located midway down the Florida Keys, on the stunning, secluded island of Duck Key, Hawks Cay offers brides, grooms, and guests a true luxury Florida Key experience, and leaves no detail spared.

Weddings at Hawks Cay become an entire weekend event, with the fun beginning the moment guests arrive. They are greeted with a welcome reception (if you want it to have a theme, how about "cheeseburgers in paradise"?), and immediately they feel like vacation has begun.

The next day guests can take part in an organized event, such as a fishing tournament, or can choose to do their own thing: swim in the saltwater lagoon or one of the five pools, take part in the dolphin interaction, visit the world-class spa, or enjoy one of the many, many water sports, including the newly launched, highly popular kiteboarding program. Looking for more ideas? Throw a casual rehearsal dinner with a Latin band. Serve guests the fish they caught earlier that day.

When it comes to the actual wedding, nothing is overlooked. Brides and bridesmaids can be pampered and beautified at the onsite salon. Vows are taken beside the rocky beach or in the gazebo that looks over the sea. Receptions can overlook the ocean or the tranquility pool, and can be small and intimate, or can accommodate well over 200 people.

All the food, overseen by former James Beard winner Wolfgang Puck, is as fresh, inspiring, and delicious as can be, and lacks the standard "chicken or fish" wedding boredom. Think seafood towers, paella stations, and Florida Keys flavors. The wedding coordinator will help couples choose what's right for them, from the menu planning, to the flowers, to the music, and everything in between. Not to be overlooked is the beauty of the property, which makes for a gorgeous backdrop to your big day.

Hawks Cay provides a truly unforgettable (and stress-free) destination wedding, and last but not least, guests don't need a passport to get there. www.hawkscay.com

MAROMA RESORT AND SPA, RIVIERA MAYA, MEXICO

By far one of the absolute best resorts in all of Mexico, Maroma is known for privacy, romance, tranquility, and true attention to detail. From the moment your guests arrive at the discreet entrance, and then take that first glance at the breathtaking property, one thing is clear: this place is special. Whether it's the open-air Mayan architecture that blends so well with nature, or the stunning beach whose beauty can be seen from just about everywhere, or the food that is nothing short of spectacular, this is the Mexican gold standard.

All of the Maroma facilities, including the incomparable guest rooms, suites, villa, beach, and jungle are at your disposal for your big event, and utmost privacy is assured. Imagine taking your vows under a flower-decked arch at sunset, followed by a moonlit, custom-prepared dinner, complete with traditional mariachi band, tropical flowers, ocean breezes, and the special Maroma touch. No detail is spared, and the expert wedding team can help coordinate every aspect of the nuptials.

No visit to Maroma is complete without spending time at the glorious, open-air Kinan Spa, whose treatments are unparalleled, and whose setting is simply heavenly. For the bride and groom, nothing is more romantic than a couples' massage and treatment that includes Mexican chocolate scrubs, a flower filled tub, and views of the jungle property. Brides, bridesmaids, and family members can be pampered like they've never been pampered before.

Whether you decide to hold the ceremony on the beach, at the candlelit pool, in the tropical gardens, or on the poolside terrace, guests will be overwhelmed and overjoyed with the experience. Only one wedding occurs at a time at the resort, ensuring the day is yours and yours alone, and no detail is too small for the expert staff to take care of. There's only one conceivable problem: your guests won't want to leave. www.maromahotel.com

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OCEAN CLUB RESORTS, TURKS AND CAICOS

Whatever type of wedding you want to have in paradise, this casually elegant resort can do it for you. Whether you want to say "I do" on the beach and then celebrate at the elegant Opus restaurant, or throw a fun and relaxed Grace Bay beach barbeque, you can have whatever you are dreaming of, and the expert coordinators can take care of every detail.

The beaches of Turks and Caicos are known to be some of the best in the Caribbean, and make an ideal choice for tropical nuptials. The resort features 86 beautifully appointed suites, and offers an array of activities for the bride, groom, and their guests with three swimming pools, poolside barbecues, a water sports and dive shop, tournament standard lighted tennis courts, a fitness center, and spa treatments. The resort also is known for its relaxed, casual vibe that's all about enjoyment and simple pleasure.

Their goal is to make the bride's life easier, and take away the stress of wedding planning. When you choose the "Weddings in Paradise" package, which includes personalized wedding coordination, a Minister/Justice of the Peace, documentation and processing, the wedding license, a tropical bouquet and boutonniere, wedding cake and champagne toast, you have nothing to worry about. Additionally, they can provide a photographer, videographer, live music or DJ, hairstylist, make-up artist, hors d'oeuvres and catered dinner reception, and even a catamaran wedding cruise and/or a deserted island drop-off for the wedding party or newlyweds to enjoy a private beach picnic. All you have to do is relax and enjoy yourself, and watch as your guests do the same.

www.oceanclubresorts.com

HACIENDA SIESTA ALEGRE, PUERTO RICO

If you're looking for the ultimate private destination, this open-air, ultra-beautiful villa is the right choice for you. It's a romantic Spanish Colonial mansion that sits alone in the foothills of the El Yunque rainforest of Puerto Rico, so you're sharing your day only with your loved ones and the surrounding nature. Tiki torches and candles light the way, crashing waves make the ultimate sound effects, guests can lose themselves in charming nooks, rooms, and gardens, and you and your new spouse can feel as if you are hosting your wedding at your personal villa in paradise.

The space is actually huge, and can accommodate up to 550 people, but don't let that scare you. It can just as easily, and comfortably, be the setting for a small, intimate gathering. They will help you plan every aspect of the event, from what you eat and drink to the lighting design, and you're sure to be impressed. Sit back, sip mojitos, and watch the sun set over the mountains and ocean as your candle-lit villa lulls your guests into island ecstasy. As an added treat, you can actually provide guests with a mini horse show or horse jumping competition, making for unique entertainment while they enjoy their pre-dinner cocktails.

While the bride and groom can spend the night in the honeymoon suite, there are also six guest rooms available for friends and family members who you would like to invite to spend the night. Of course in a setting this nice, the party just might last until morning.

While it feels like it's a world away, Hacienda Siesta Alegre is actually less than thirty minutes from the airport, making it as convenient as it is secluded.

www.haciendasiestaalegre.com

Ocean Club Resorts - photo courtesy of
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THE FRENCHMAN'S REEF & MORNING STAR MARRIOTT BEACH RESORT, ST. THOMAS

Whether it's the beauty of the Virgin Islands or the expertise and extra special attention of the "Weddings in Paradise" staff, The Frenchman's Reef & Morning Star Marriott Beach Resort has become the place for weddings in St. Thomas - with over 5,000 happily married couples to date.

To ensure a stress free event, Weddings in Paradise offers four different St. Thomas wedding packages and a full service staff that will help you every step of the way.

At this spectacular resort, couples recite their vows in a charming "Gazebo by the Sea" perched in a garden atop a bluff, overlooking the blue waters of the Caribbean Sea.

Whatever your dream is for your special day, "Weddings in Paradise" can make it happen. With an offering of unique packages, The Frenchman's Reef & Morning Star Marriott Beach Resort gives you the opportunity to be as informal or elaborate as you wish.

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www.weddingsinparadise.vi



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