

EXPLORING TRAVEL FAVORITES AND FRONTIERS

# TRAVEL AGE WEST

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Love  
*Will Find a*  
**WAY**

*What you need to know  
about selling destination  
weddings now*

**CRUISES RESUME  
IN EUROPE  
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**THE LATEST  
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# *Love* *Will Find A Way*



# What you need to know about selling destination weddings now

BY MARK CHESNUT

Los Cabos, Mexico, is a popular spot for destination weddings.

**A**fter months of pandemic-era wedding delays, couples are venturing out to tie the knot in sun-soaked international settings — and in numbers not seen since before the COVID-19 pandemic, according to many travel advisors and hoteliers.

“After numerous postponements of 2020 wedding dates, I’m seeing the international destination wedding market on its way back to full recovery,” said Maya George, an advisor at Global Travel Collection’s Tzell Travel Group and founder of Our Black Passports in Plainfield, N.J.

The return of international destination weddings is confirmed by various suppliers. A recent report from IHG Hotels & Resorts, for example, showed more wedding bookings in April 2021 than in April 2019. Acre Resort in Los Cabos, Mexico, meanwhile, had about 100 weddings booked for 2020 before the pandemic struck. Now, the property has 85 marriages scheduled for the first half of 2022, and has not even started to book for the second half of the year.

Gerry Farrulla, director of event management at The St. Regis Bahia Beach Resort in Puerto Rico, reports similarly impressive growth.

“I’ve been hosting weddings for many years and can honestly say that the overwhelming demand for weddings this year and the next is something that I have never experienced,” she said.

As a result, couples may find limited availability, according to Andrea Norfolk, president of Shoreline Destinations in Finksburg, Md.

“Because so many destination weddings needed to be rescheduled, there is limited availability at resorts for 2021, and we have had couples choose to have their weddings in 2022 instead,” she said. “We are also seeing guests for summer 2021 weddings wait to book and later find out that the resort is sold out due to the increase in travel. Although our team has been encouraging guests to book early while we have rooms available in our room blocks, guests for our summer weddings have still been hesitant. We have had situations where guests are not able to get their preferred room type or are not even able to attend at all due to resort availability.”

## How They Are Booking

**M**any couples are planning destination weddings differently than they would have before the pandemic, according to Fernando Luis, senior commercial director for the Caribbean and Latin America at Hilton Hotels & Resorts.

“It’s interesting to see that many customers who have planned an international destination



wedding are either reducing the size or postponing the celebration, rather than canceling or choosing a new destination,” he said. “We have seen this dynamic at Waldorf Astoria Los Cabos Pedregal and at Hilton Los Cabos Beach & Golf Resort.”

Maritza Molina, director of sales and marketing at Renaissance Curacao Resort & Casino,

agreed that booking habits have changed.

“Last-minute requests are bigger than they ever were before, and some wedding bookings are coming in as close as three or four months out,” she said.

Richard Engle, a Denver-based luxury travel advisor at Protravel Chicago, noted that many couples are booking based on limited research.

“The most surprising trend is a lack of shopping on the part of the bridal couple,” he said. “They are choosing Mexico due to consistent ease of travel during the COVID-19 pandemic, while other destinations keep changing their protocols and rules.”

## Where They Are Going

**T**he destinations that opened first to tourism during the pandemic are logically attracting the attention of those about to get hitched.

“Mexico remained a healthy destination for us throughout the pandemic, as it didn’t — and does not — require testing for entry, and it continues to be strong,” said Jennifer Avey, vice president of marketing for Destination Weddings Travel Group, a division of Celebration Travel Group. “We are seeing strong bookings to Riviera Maya, Cancun, Playa Mujeres/Costa Mujeres and Cabo San Lucas and — outside of Mexico — in Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic and Montego Bay, Jamaica, as well.”

Mexico and the Dominican Republic have been top sellers for destination weddings for Stephen Scott, an advisor at Global Travel Collection’s Protravel International in Chicago. But he predicts bookings will diversify soon.

“I expect that we are going to have travelers branch out more and get back to other parts of the Caribbean, such as Anguilla,” he said. “Some



The Ocean Club, a Four Seasons Resort, has introduced an elopement package.



The Ocean Club, a Four Seasons Resort, is located on Paradise Island, Bahamas.



Smaller weddings do not necessarily mean smaller budgets.

will head over to Europe and, for the adventurous luxe crowd, we will see Dubai springboard even further with groups and events. That destination has new venues, such as the Ain Dubai, and new hotels including SLS and Address Beach Resort, both of which have sky-high infinity pools for incredible wedding photos.”

Central America is already on the rise as a wedding destination, according to Ashley Les, an advisor at Global Travel Collection’s Pro-travel International, who currently works from Belize.

“I’m finding more clients are looking for small hotels to buy out,” she said. “In destinations such as Costa Rica and Belize, where many, if not most hotels are small – often with fewer than 50 rooms – the couple buys out the entire resort to create their own wedding ‘bubble.’”

### High-Tech Touches

Just as it has in the workplace, technology has played an increasingly important role in destination weddings – from Zoom calls to live online events.

“After a series of delays as a result of the pandemic, couples are not pausing their events any longer for those who cannot make it,” Avey said. “Rather, they are live-streaming their ceremony to share the special

moment with those who were unable to attend the celebration.”

Round Hill Hotel and Villas in Montego Bay, Jamaica, is among the properties with new, high-tech wedding programs.

“Round Hill has unveiled new virtual wedding packages, allowing for extended gatherings through a

hybrid in-person/virtual format,” said Linda Lawrence, the hotel’s director of sales and marketing. “With more intimate group sizes attending a wedding on-site at Round Hill, couples can take comfort in inviting up to 100 additional virtual guests to participate in the festivities, utilizing an array of high-tech amenities that will make them feel as if they are there.”





### The Size of the Group

It is no surprise that wedding parties have shrunk during the pandemic, and that has created demand for variations on the traditional big ceremony. One of the simplest is the elopement wedding, which offers easier planning at a time when travel can still be complicated.

Among the properties that have introduced new elopement packages is The Ocean Club, a Four Seasons Resort on Paradise Island, Bahamas.

"People have been looking to elope, either just as a couple or with their immediate families, so most of the requests we are seeing are for intimate groups," said Nancy Brenner, the property's director of sales and events. "With this increase in demand, we have developed a very exclusive new elopement experience for those who are looking for an unforgettable moment that is uniquely theirs in paradise."

At Jamaica Inn, in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, micro weddings are now the most popular way to tie the knot,

according to Tina Smith, the resort's wedding specialist.

"Couples now prefer to keep their weddings more personal, hosting smaller intimate weddings with mostly immediate family members and close friends," she said.

Still, smaller nuptials

do not necessarily mean that the wedding couples are spending less money, according to Daniela Trava Albarran, general manager at Grand Residences Riviera Cancun in Puerto Morelos, Mexico.

"The budgets that would typically tie into a more elaborate event are now being poured into specialized experiences for a smaller group to enjoy together," she explained. "For example, some couples have decided to incorporate the guided tequila or wine tasting activity we have available for guests at the resort."

Hilton's Luis agreed that smaller wedding groups can still incorporate extravagant details.

"One of the greatest advantages is that these types of events usually have a higher budget per person, allowing events to be more personalized, with elaborate decor or over-the-top menus," he said.

Marilyn Cairo, vice president of global sales for Premier Worldwide Marketing, the marketing and sales provider for Karisma Hotels & Resorts, has also witnessed robust budgets in recent months.

"As the destination wedding industry continues to recover, we are seeing an uptick in couples wanting to create private events at our resorts, and they are willing to spend more money to make the experience their own," she said. "They want to ensure every detail is exactly what they envisioned, and this has led to an increase in couples taking pre-wedding get-aways – visiting the resort ahead of the actual event to get a feel for the vibe it offers, experience the property's amenities and get a real understanding of what their wedding will look like before making any final decisions."

To that end, Karisma Hotels & Resorts now offers a Destination Wedding Dress Rehearsal package at its properties, allowing couples to visit the property before the event.

Melia Hotels International is reporting similar big-budget spending trends, according to Lucy Martinez Ramirez, the company's romance director.

"We are seeing that couples would rather spend more on an over-the-top wedding affair with incredible design and custom experiences, inviting only close family and

friends, rather than larger groups," she said.

That trend may explain why Paradisus by Melia recently introduced splashy wedding packages like Go Out With a Bang, which includes a fireworks display, and All Aboard, featuring a ceremony at sea.

"In terms of design, one of the biggest trends is the 'Bridgerton'-style wedding, with fanciful, over-the-top dresses and pale blues, greens and pinks in the decor and flowers," Martinez Ramirez said.

While small ceremonies may continue to draw bookings, larger



groups will likely return in the near future, according to Erica Doyne, senior vice president

of marketing and communications at AMResorts, which offers an Intimate Weddings program for groups of up to 14 guests.

"Small but spectacular weddings, with a virtual component to share with those not ready to travel yet, are a trend that we expect to be around for quite some time," she said, but noted that "as vaccines continue to roll out, we expect larger weddings to continue booking for the end of this year and into 2022." ●

## The Rise of LGBTQ Destination Weddings

Once a niche product offered by few hoteliers, LGBTQ destination weddings have entered the mainstream portfolio at many hotels. According to a 2018 survey by Community Marketing and Insights and the Equality Institute, 18% of LGBTQ couples who got married planned a destination wedding. Among international destinations, Mexico ranked as the first choice for half of respondents, followed by Canada, Europe and South America.

"LGBTQ destination weddings are a growing market and a significantly large segment of our industry," said Fernando Luis, senior commercial director for the Caribbean and Latin America at Hilton Hotels & Resorts. "At Hilton, we lead all of our efforts with hospitality, and diversity and inclusion are ingrained into our culture."

Greater acceptance has created more sales opportunities for travel agencies and suppliers, according to Jennifer Avey, vice president of marketing at Destination Weddings Travel Group, part of Celebration Travel Group.

"The LGBTQ+ segment continues to grow quickly for us," she said, noting that the most popular destinations for this market include Cancun, the Riviera Maya and Cabo San Lucas, Mexico; the Dominican Republic; and Costa Rica.

Choosing the right hotel is crucial for this wedding market, according to Alison Ramirez, an advisor at Protravel Chicago.

"The destinations are largely the same [as for other destination weddings], but the properties we use are often different," she explained. "Some really great properties simply are not tuned in to the details of how such weddings differ from those in the mainstream. Finding the right place for an LGBTQ+ wedding takes research and limits the field on which resorts qualify. We tend to be particularly careful here, because sometimes a resort promotes itself as LGBTQ-friendly but it turns out they don't know everything they should when it comes to the details."



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