

Honeymoon Report

Destination Weddings Are On The Rise

By Sherrie Sen

NEW YORK — Sweethearts may still be heading off to traditional destinations like Jamaica, the Bahamas and St. Lucia for their honeymoons, but more and more couples are saying their "I do's" with family and friends in tow, literally bringing them along to their honeymoon destinations.

Recent research shows that a number of new trends are emerging within the honeymoon sector, and if agents are to maximize their returns, the "new paradigms" need to be understood, industry observers said.

According to Geri Bain, travel editor at *Modern Bride* magazine, "destination weddings are becoming very popular, with more people going to different holiday locations to get married."

Modern Bride's Honeymoon Market Report 1999 shows that destination weddings have grown by 2 percent, from 4.3 percent in 1985 to 6.4 percent in 1999. Resorts have caught on to the idea that couples are preferring to get married at destinations, and have responded by offering incentives and more bridal/honeymoon packages.

Lloyd Miller, president and co-owner of Departures travel agency, WinterPark, Fla., explained, "honeymoon destinations have not changed all that much, but resorts are offering much more to their customers, like free wedding packages thrown in for extended stays. Consequently, many more people are getting married at those destinations."

A strong U.S. economy and the strength of the dollar have also opened up faraway places to honeymooners, including Singapore and the South Seas. What's more, the socioeconomic background of newlyweds is changing. According to 1999 research from the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA), the average age of couples taking honeymoons trips is 26.9 years. According to *Modern Bride*, in 1980, the average age of couples taking honeymoons was 20.

Sallie Brady, travel editor at *Bride's* (Condé Nast) says, "many of these older newlyweds tend to be college educated ... it's fair to say that these people have already traveled for business, so they are much more open to traveling to other unusual destinations such as the Maldives, Thailand and Bali." Angela Trout, associate travel editor of *New England Bride*, explained, "these couples did the hedonism thing when they were younger. They now want something a little unique and a bit more sophisticated."

The demand for unusual honeymoon hot spots has spawned new destinations such as Bali, Costa Rica, Alaska, Europe, and even Africa. According to Brady, "although the Caribbean and the Bahamas are still favorites, rarer resorts from those locales are opening up, such as the U.S. Virgin Islands. [Some] are pushing the soft adventure trip and some of the resorts even provide cute little backpacks with mini toiletries for hikers."

Other emerging destinations include

Australia's Barrier Reef and New Zealand. "The natural beauty of these places, and the fact that they are English-speaking, makes them more attractive," Brady said. Concurrently, a shift in the age and background of honeymooners has brought about a change in demands. Older newlyweds are no longer satisfied by the simple fun and sun formula.

Modern Bride's Honeymoon Market Report (1999) shows that the percentage of couples looking for adventure as the defining factor in their trips has gone up from 4.4 in 1995, to 5.1 percent in 1999. Adventure has become a significant factor when booking honeymoons. Activities like diving and snorkeling feature high on the roster of activities at most honeymoon resorts. "Soft adventures, like kayaking, hiking, and snorkeling are very popular," said Brady. Similarly, Bain of *Modern Bride*, says, "repelling, bungee-jumping, and AVT (Alternative Vehicle Trips), such as river rafting and riding across dunes,

are gaining popularity." Activity-led honeymoons have gained impetus.

Spas are also garnering favor, Brady says. "Spas are becoming more and more popular with newlyweds. Spa resorts in beautiful settings with activities like hiking, biking, or golfing, make ideal honeymoon resorts."

Resorts have begun to grasp the needs of their customers too. "Many of our honeymoon clients are on second and third marriages. They've done the whole big wedding affair, and now they are looking for something different, something more intimate. Somewhere that they can bring a few family and friends to," Miller said. Honeymoon destinations do just that, "they provide the services, lodgings, and set the scene," Miller said.

Simultaneously, ecotourism is another niche that is growing in the new honeymoon market. Older, more educated couples are demanding more intellectual stimulation, according to Bain.

Sandals Takes 'Test Drive' Honeymooners into 2001

By Sherrie Sen

NEW YORK — Riding on the success of its last "Test Drive Your Honeymoon" promotion, held in June, Sandals is extending its daylong mini-honeymoon program into 2001. The initiative, co-sponsored by *Bride's* magazine, flies pre-nuptial couples to preview Sandals Royal Caribbean resort in Montego Bay, Jamaica, offering nearly wedded pairs the chance to examine the resorts facilities, including the rooms, public areas and dining rooms.

Although couples only spend five actual hours on the ground, "it gives people enough time to look at the accommodations, activities, to see the rooms, and to speak to other guests who have been there longer. It's a physical tour," said John Lynch, Sandals' executive vice president, sales worldwide.

"Customers are given the chance to try out the land and watersport activities, and to sample the libations and cuisine," Lynch explained.

In addition, brides- and grooms-to-be are also treated to poolside Caribbean dance lessons and lunch. The package costs \$149 per person (including roundtrip airfare from Atlanta, JFK, Newark, Philadelphia, Miami or Baltimore). Couples who decide to book a honeymoon of six nights or more within 14 days of returning home are credited the full price of the review.

Sandals' Test Drive honeymoon



The promotion was a hit, Sandals said.

promotion was such a resounding success that, according to Lynch, "37 participating couples (44 percent) have booked to date ... almost a 50 percent success rate. The average take-up rate is normally 30 percent. This is a lot higher than we anticipated. One third of the group attending booked our honeymoon packages right there on the spot."

Figures from Sandals show that 84 couples took up the challenge, and all seats were sold out.

"Our low-key approach and soft sell encourages people to try us out, and it works." Sandals' laid back policy extends to couples not having to show proof of engagement. "The \$149 qualifies you. If this was a free service, it would be somewhat different," Lynch explained.

"We priced the package accordingly," Lynch added.

What's more, before embarking on this promotion, Sandals conducted an online poll at its Web site (www.sandals.com) to gauge consumer interest.

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