

Couples are avoiding the stresses and strains of a traditional wedding by finding a secluded spot abroad to tie the knot, writes **Sara Yin**



Tanya Sharp and her husband Tim (left) were married in Bali, where a local dancer (above) entertained guests. Photos: Christopher Leggett

Runaway brides

With hundreds of loosely connected friends, colleagues and distant relatives who "must" be invited, and overbearing family members to pacify, traditional weddings can be hugely stressful. It's no wonder Hong Kong couples are looking to avoid such pressure-cooker weddings. And what better way to do that than flee the city for intimate nuptials on a private beach or a centuries-old monastery in Bhutan?

The practice is still rare in Hong Kong since filial customs often override the couple's wishes. Local wedding planners estimate that a mere 1 per cent of the 300,000 nuptials held by Hongkongers every year take place abroad – a far cry from the 16 per cent in the US cited by an industry study. But some insiders expect this ratio to multiply tenfold within a decade as attitudes change among the new generation of Hongkongers.

"It's quite difficult for locals unless their parents are open-minded," says Sharon Sau-king Meakins, an executive assistant who got married in Hawaii to escape the pressure of local traditions. "But I just thought, 'This is my special day. I'm going to do what I want'."

Although born and raised in Hong Kong, she didn't want a local wedding. "I'd been to many weddings here and the brides always looked so stressed," Meakins says. "I wanted something happy, carefree. I didn't want to have to worry about people I didn't know criticising the food or the way I looked."

So she made plans without her parents' involvement. She and husband Victor paid for two close couples to spend two weeks with them in Hawaii. The small group relaxed and partied before celebrating the wedding in a luxury hotel, after which the friends continued their holiday on different islands. The total cost – about HK\$100,000 – was "almost the same as having a big wedding in Hong Kong", but Meakins says it was the most romantic, unforgettable experience of her life.

"When you have a destination wedding, you just have to remind yourself who the decision maker is – you, or your parents," Meakins says.

Evelyn Mills of Marriage Maestros, a company specialising in bespoke, high-end weddings, says there are also compelling psychological benefits for overworked young couples to take their weddings overseas. "People who get married locally often try to take on all the preparation work themselves," she says. "They know the city and think they should pick everything. Whereas for destination weddings, the couple is forced to rely on someone else to handle most of the details."

For weddings in Hong Kong, couples typically take just one or two

days off work before the big day to prepare, Mills says. "Come wedding day, they're usually still stressed out about something in the office. Meanwhile, destination couples typically go to the site a week in advance so they're already in a relaxed 'wedding mode'."

Sun-soaked Bali and Thailand have long been the most popular destinations for Hong Kong-based couples to marry. Far-flung beaches in Guam and Hawaii come close behind; although the flights are long, these two islands have highly competitive wedding services that help bring down venue prices. Bali weddings typically run up to a third more than Guam weddings, says a spokeswoman for Global Weddings, a specialist service that sells more packages to the US than any other destination.

Macau is another up-and-coming spot, says Mills. Its proximity, shorter waiting list and capacity for handling big parties make it a popular alternative to the heavily booked Hong Kong Convention Centre. And offbeat

Wedding, is convinced Okinawa's pristine beaches will beckon to couples here. "It's becoming as popular as Hokkaido," he says. "The tides there are much cleaner than Guam's and prices are at least a third less."

But getaway nuptials don't come cheap. The bill for a small, top-end destination wedding can be as much as a resplendent affair in Hong Kong. That's because couples have to bear other costs that quickly add up, such as accommodation for a week or more, airport transfers for guests, higher alcohol taxes and a separate trip to scout venues.

And Mills says destination weddings are often spread over several days, which multiplies the cost of basic components such as flowers, food, photography and venue reservation. Averaging the quotes from various planners, a typical luxury destination wedding for a party of 50 will come to more than HK\$200,000.

Fortunately, travel is now easier than ever. Graham Elson, founder of Concorde Travel, says new direct routes to places such as Okinawa are making destination weddings more feasible.

Although most parties prefer to work with travel agents, chartered planes are also a cost-effective option for large wedding parties of more than 100 people.

The real cost benefit, it seems, comes through value rather than actual dollars.

Tanya Sharp experienced this last month when she and husband Tim tied the knot in Bali. Seventy guests flew in to spend a week with the couple at a private villa before the two exchanged vows at a beach ceremony. Then the champagne was popped, a scrumptious Balinese feast served and a cover band played on.

"Given all we had in Bali – a private spot, band, free-flowing alcohol – it cost less than a third of what we would've had to pay here," says Sharp. Other planners say costs can be kept to a minimum by buying wedding packages, rather than dealing with individual overseas suppliers.

Like Meakins, Sharp saw the added bonus of being able to reduce the number of guests. "I'm half Greek, so I have enough family to fill a small country. This was a brilliant way to cut down the invitation list. You can be pretty sure your second cousin twice removed who you never see probably won't fly overseas to attend your wedding," she says.

Sharp calls her getaway nuptials the best decision she has ever made. "My wedding day was like one great party where everyone knew each other already, because we'd been partying together all week," she says. "It was the most beautiful, amazing wedding I'd ever seen – and I didn't have to organise a thing!"

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Sharon Sau-king Meakins, who was married in Hawaii



locations such as Goa, Okinawa, Cebu, Siem Reap and Ho Chi Minh City are developing wedding packages to cater to couples looking for more unusual options.

Sonya Yeung, founder of Bliss Creations, is forging ties with service providers in Cambodia. "Cambodia is a fascinating country. It's not overdeveloped, it's adventurous and it has enough services to cater to high-end or backpacker budgets," she says. "There's also the fantastic opportunity to get married at a small temple. The service and setting will probably be simple but the place will appeal to people who want something a bit different."

Daigo Watanabe, Hong Kong branch director for Japanese wedding planner Watanabe