



CHOOSING YOUR RECEPTION SITE



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Although your wedding celebration may last only one day, finding the best place to hold it will help ensure a lifetime of wonderful memories. No matter what type of reception you'd like to have, there's a location that's right for you. A small inn can provide the warm feel of a historic home while offering the services of a larger site. It will often have lovely settings both inside and out.

For their September 2003 wedding reception in Santa Fe, N.M., Heidi Ernst and Tim Jones knew the mood they wanted to create. "It was very important to us that our guests were comfortable and that they could experience the incredible beauty of Santa Fe," Heidi says.

Hoping to find an intimate setting for their 90 guests, the couple first looked at a bed-and-breakfast and a small hotel. Then they heard about a little-known stone lodge on the side of a mountain in Hyde Memorial State Park. "We got there, and we thought, 'This is it,'" says Heidi. "We both love the mountains. The trees came right up to the lodge, and there was a patio with a fire pit, which we knew would be great to use after the sun set." Although the site lacked some of the amenities of typical reception locations -- for one thing, it didn't have a kitchen -- the two felt that any extra work would be worth it. For them, the lodge's uniqueness was what made it the perfect place.

Setting the Tone

It's every couple's wish to find the ideal location for their wedding celebration; after all, more than anything else, it will literally set the stage for the entire event. Careful consideration early on in the planning process will help you with this important decision. The two of you should agree not only on

practical matters such as your budget and the number of guests to invite but also on less tangible aspects, such as the atmosphere you desire.

Chances are, you already have an idea of the tone you want your wedding to have. Perhaps you've always dreamed of a formal seated dinner under a chandeliered ceiling, or a candlelit meal at home with only your closest family and friends. Or maybe you're picturing a playful day at an offbeat location, such as an amusement park. If nothing immediately stands out, however, look to your personal style. "Couples should put their stamp on their wedding," says Lisa Crowder of Storybook Wedding Consulting in Atlanta. "Think about your favorite hobbies, colors, flowers, foods, even the decor of your home." These preferences will point you toward the kinds of sites that might suit you.

Determining Your Needs

You'll also need to ask yourself whether you can commit to the amount of time and attention a given site may require. "If you don't have a lot of time to plan, or if you'd just prefer that everything be taken care of, it may be best to go with something that's all-inclusive," Crowder says.

Hotels, large restaurants, and other locations with banquet facilities, such as country clubs, host weddings regularly so they are likely to have an in-house catering staff or relationships with certain outside caterers. They may also be able to recommend other wedding vendors. These "establishment" choices are popular with couples for good reason: They can handle everything from the cake to the table linens, and they have the experience needed to make sure that nothing gets overlooked.

Selecting such a place doesn't necessarily mean you have to relinquish all control, however; if you have your heart set on a particular caterer, for instance, the site may be willing to accommodate your choice.

For couples who decide to organize the reception themselves, or who prefer a more unusual location, the range of options is as broad as their imagination. A site such as a photographer's studio or a campground, for example, can result in a memorable wedding. Though many nontraditional locations are happy to rent out their space, be aware that their role often ends there. Their staff probably won't be qualified to manage a wedding reception or make recommendations about appropriate vendors, which means you'll have to do considerable planning.

It may be helpful to hire a wedding coordinator or choose a caterer who not only has a reputation for cooking great food but also has experience dealing with many different situations. This was one of the keys to making Heidi Ernst Jones's reception run smoothly. Her caterer had worked at the lodge before and knew it didn't have a kitchen, so he was prepared to set up his own under a tent. Don't rely on vendors, though, to find out about such things on their own; you should be aware of all issues beforehand.

Special Considerations

Your choice may also necessitate letting guests know what to expect. For Leslie Guth and Paul Daly, who held their June 2001 wedding on a boat touring New York City's harbor, that meant emphasizing in the invitation that guests be punctual. Unlike most locations, theirs left little leeway for late arrivals; once a boat leaves, it does not turn back for stragglers. And, of course, everyone must stay at the reception until the boat returns to shore. "Since we also wanted to have the ceremony on the boat, we had to find an officiant who was able and willing to stay for the entire wedding," says Leslie. "It took a bit of searching."

Certain sites present other special challenges. Many couples gravitate toward outdoor locations -- there's something especially romantic about celebrating your marriage under a wide-open sky. But if

you choose a garden, rooftop, beach, or other fresh-air locale, you must be prepared for inclement weather. Even if the forecast indicates a beautiful day, it's a good idea to reserve at least one tent; it can provide relief from the sun as well as protect against any rain. You should also have an alternate, indoor location as a backup in case there's a storm or the weather otherwise makes being outside, even under a tent, impossible.

If you or a relative or friend lives in a spacious house with scenic grounds, an at-home event is a wonderful way to personalize your reception. It can also save you money if you're having a small, casual gathering and family members or friends help with the preparations. But a more elaborate affair will require a great deal of planning, and it may actually cost more than you would spend at a location such as a hotel. That's because you may have to rent everything from tables to tents to additional equipment and supplies, as well as hire the waitstaff and other professionals whose services are often included in many sites' fees. Adequate electrical power may be an issue, and you'll want to be sure there are enough restroom facilities and places to park. You'll also need to check local noise ordinances to find out if music must stop at a certain time.

As you compile a list of possible sites, keep in mind the distance between the ceremony and the reception. It's obviously most convenient to hold everything at one location, but will you use the same room for both events? If you prefer a single space, you'll have to allow time for the ceremony setup to be dismantled and the reception to be arranged. Choosing two areas will avoid this process, but it could cost more. If you intend to have the ceremony at a separate site, such as in a church or a synagogue, you should select a reception location that's as close as possible. Generally, it's best not to make guests drive more than a half hour to get there.

Asking the Right Questions

After you've narrowed down your choices, call the events manager at each location. Ask whether the site is available during the month you want in order to gauge its general availability. Find out the maximum number of people that can comfortably fit in the space for the type of party you'd like. That's not necessarily the official capacity; you'll need more room for a seated dinner than for a cocktail reception where most guests will be standing. Ask about the rental fee, what's included in the cost, and how they calculate it: Some places charge per head, while others bill a flat fee.

Depending on what your priorities are, there are additional questions you may want to ask. Do you have to rent the site for a minimum time period? Are there restrictions on the kinds of decorations allowed? You may also want to find out whether the site holds simultaneous events. If it does, will loud noise from another party carry over to yours? Once you're satisfied with the answers, make an appointment to visit the location.

When you first walk into a space -- especially one with a lot of emotional significance, beautiful architecture, or a stunning view -- it can be easy to overlook practical concerns. But many details need to be taken into consideration. It's important to visit during the time of day when you will want to use the site; if you're having an evening affair, for example, you should see how the lighting makes the room look. Envision the place set up for your event: Where will the tables, bar, and food stations be? Is there enough space for dancing? Will your theme or color scheme work with the existing decor or setting? Assess the lighting, sound, and electrical situation -- where can the band play? If you want to have your ceremony in the same room as the reception, check if there's a place where guests will be able to enjoy cocktails (such as a balcony or outdoor patio) while the space is being rearranged. Don't forget to notice if there is a coatroom or coatrack, adequate security, sufficient parking, well-maintained restrooms, and accessibility for disabled or elderly guests.

Try to tour at least two or three sites before making your decision. Whenever possible, revisit your

top choices while they're hosting a wedding, especially if the reception's style is similar to your vision. If the place you love the most seems too expensive, don't rule it out. Consider trimming the budget for food and drinks, or cutting back on your decorating expenses. Another option is to change your wedding date. Friday nights and Sunday afternoons will likely be less expensive, as will off-season months such as January and February.

Ultimately, finding the right reception location is a lot like walking into the right house: You'll know it when you see it. Trust your instincts, and the emotional impact of your site will translate into a personal and meaningful wedding day.

Site Contracts

When you select a reception site, you may be asked to pay a deposit of 25 percent to 50 percent of the total rental cost to hold your date. Then you'll receive a contract. Before you sign it, make sure that it includes the following:

1. The exact date of your reception.
2. The start and end times of the rental period. This is the total time you'll be able to use the space, which means you'll need to take care of setup and breakdown during these hours.
3. The name or a description of the room or area the party will be in, and the name or description of an alternate space, if applicable.
4. The total rental cost and how it is calculated, plus information about overtime fees. Places that charge per head should indicate the number of people included in the price.
5. A list of everything the site will provide (tables, chairs, food, valet parking, coatroom attendants), itemized with prices, if additional.
6. A payment schedule and the cancellation and refund policy.
7. Proof of liability insurance, as well as a liquor license, if you're planning to serve alcohol. You may want to consider getting your own liability insurance to protect against injuries to guests or staff, damage to the property, and alcohol-related accidents; many locations require it.
8. Any decorating restrictions (for example, a historic site may forbid objects from being moved, or a location may not allow candles) or other rules (such as a dress code).
9. Any additional terms you may have already agreed upon orally.