

BY ILENE DENTON

MAKING IT YOURS

Sarasota's best weddings are all about the personal touch.



TROPICAL BLISS Fresh air, graceful palms and a car the color of the Gulf of Mexico—just some of the elements that made Missy and Jeffrey Sanders' Longboat Key Club wedding picture-perfect.

Weddings today are more than the joining of two individuals into one couple. They're the party of a lifetime, and more than ever, the expression of individual personalities and dreams. For many, the perfect wedding means a tropical setting, with balmy weather, a beautiful beach and guests who are in the vacation mood.

That's the essence of a Sarasota wedding and the reason why lovebirds from across the country, and, yes, even Europe, are flocking to Sarasota to make their wedding dreams come true. They're drawn to the romantic notion of a sunset ceremony on the beach or surrounded by the tropical splendor of Selby Gardens, at a historic venue such as the elegant, 1920s-era Crosley Mansion, a fairy-tale setting like the larger-than-life courtyard of the Ringling Museum (with a 21-foot-tall bronze copy of Michelangelo's *David* towering over the affair), or the bayside terrace of John Ringling's ornate Italianate palace, Cà d'Zan.



Industry insiders tell us Sarasota's uniquely beautiful and varied locales provide dramatic inspiration for beautiful weddings. Elaborate fantasies, from a bride arriving by horseback on the beach to a 500-guest blowout at the Ringling Museum, featuring fireworks and music by a famous rock band, are everyday business to local wedding planners.

And when the last beat of the Macarena fades and it's time to ride off into the future, the happy couple is already in one of the best beach honeymoon spots in the nation.

We asked some Sarasota wedding professionals with experience in luxury weddings what trends they're spotting right now. Here's what they had to say.



were luggage tags, made by the bride, displayed in a vintage travel trunk. Grandma's favorite cookies wrapped in pretty paper make a wonderful party favor and add a warm touch to an otherwise elaborate ceremony. Or use the family silver as serving pieces.

Intimate is in. Many weddings today are intimate in scale, small

jewels where every facet shines. (One great location: St. Mary's Chapel at Historic Spanish Point, a beautifully restored jewel box of a chapel with original stained glass windows, built in 1895.) Kim Pate of the Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota says the average size wedding party right now at the Ritz is between 40 and 50 guests, "close-knit friends and family." Don't let the smaller size fool you—an intimate wedding is often as complicated to plan as a bigger blowout. People want convenience and value, Pate says, so they're asking the hotel to arrange the officiant, musicians, photographer and even the bridal bouquet and boutonniere.

Build in the fun. Budget be damned, most brides and grooms are still looking for a seated affair, with top-quality entertainment being the most important aspect. To guarantee a good time for all, end the evening with a candy bar buffet, so guests can take home sweet memories.

Classic is always in style. Despite the trend to personalization, if it's a traditional formal wedding you want—ivory flowers, shell-colored linens, gold Chiavari chairs, hand-lettered calligraphy—go for it. To go classic with a modern twist, Kaney suggests one burst of color, something like a bridal bouquet of bright coral roses with no greenery that will pop against the ivory palette.

Give back to the community. Instead of giving small gifts to attendees, some bridal couples will make a donation to a charity of their choice on behalf of their guests. The Ritz-Carlton even created a program around the trend. Through their "A Vow to Help Others" program, newlyweds who marry at the Ritz can donate 5 percent of their budget—half to the charity of their choice and half to the Ritz's Community Footprints Fund, which goes to charities that target hunger and poverty relief, disadvantaged children and environmental conservation.

Think green. Eco-themed weddings are the next big thing. Hybrid cars carry the happy couple from church to reception site, where the dinner menu is certified organic, served with organic wines, of course. Unused food is donated afterwards to the local food bank, and flowers are donated to area hospitals or nursing homes. Savvy venues like the Ritz, with its own flower donation program, have anticipated the trend and made it easy for the bridal couple to participate. ■

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Personalization is today's big trend. Themed weddings "really bring out the personality of the couple," says wedding planner Nicole Kaney of NK Productions, who recently created a beach wedding for Missy Lippincott and Jeffrey Sanders under a big tent at the Longboat Key Club that was themed down to the tiniest details: a rainbow of ocean-blue colors in dress and decor, seashells dangling from the bridal bouquet, a huge mermaid ice sculpture, gobo lights that transformed the dance floor into an ocean tableau, and table numbers displayed in hand-made custom seashell frames. (Each table was named for a different beach, of course.) The newlyweds—she grew up vacationing with her family on Longboat Key, and so the destination wedding was a sentimental journey, indeed—made their exit in a 1957 turquoise-blue Edsel.

Brides are also choosing creative invitations that wow their guests, from framed documents enclosed in satin-wrapped silk boxes with Swarovski clasps to funky, colorful designs embellished with beads or feathers. Many couples ask their caterer or sommelier to concoct a signature drink just for their event, and pets are giving nephews and nieces a run for the money as ring-bearers. If it's beautiful, striking and reflects your taste, it doesn't matter what Emily Post would have thought, and that holds true for everything from flowers to attendants' gifts.

Incorporate family traditions. The simplest things can be spectacular if they evoke treasured memories. For a wedding Kaney designed for an American bride and Australian bridegroom who met while studying in Asia, the place cards