

Destination: Matrimony

Excerpt by Robin Gunn

Anyone taking a stroll through Savannah's Historic District will quickly spot tourists or visitors savoring the romance of the city - sharing a glass of wine at an outdoor caf , having their photos taken at the Forsyth Park fountain or clip-clopping around a square on a horse-drawn carriage tour. Lately, more and more couples in love are making a very special trip to Savannah - they have decided to hold their dream wedding in our city.

For Claire Costello and LaMont Albertson, Savannah had an interesting family connection and made logistical sense. "We live in Alaska, but my family is in Ireland," said Claire of their 2004 marriage. "We thought the East Coast would be a good midway point, but we didn't want New England. My husband suggested Savannah; his father was born at Hunter (Army) Airfield and (his father's) second marriage took place in Forsyth Park in the early 1990s."



Often couples come to Savannah for their weddings seeking a fresh approach to the day.

"When some brides say they want their wedding to be unique, that translates into 'they don't want to do it the way their sister did.'" Said Julie Ford Musselman, an event coordinator who does fabulous weddings. Many times, "all of the other family members have used the two available reception halls in the town where they are from."

Musselman notes that when most of the couple's friends have no connection to the bride's hometown, Savannah offers more entertainment options for them than would a smaller community. "People have things to do - tours, antiquing, shopping. Couples don't have to worry about entertaining their guests here."

Planning Your Savannah-Style Destination Wedding

For the already busy bride, planning a wedding in an unfamiliar and distant city can bring extra challenges. Lack of familiarity with locations and caterers and even determining the distances between venues can lead to unexpected delays or glitches.

Standard planning tasks can take on an extra logistical dimension when being handled long-distance. Consider these questions: "How will I get my wedding dress from Cincinnati to Savannah? Will my out-of-town guests have their own transportation from the wedding to the reception, or will I need to provide that? How will I select a band for the reception when I won't be able to go hear them before the wedding? What will we do with wedding gifts that are brought to Savannah by our guests?"

Getting Help

A bride (and groom) may need varying amounts of local help getting answers to difficult organizing questions, depending on the size of the wedding, the distance from her home to Savannah and the amount of help being provided to the bride back home.

For many brides and grooms, the potential planning headaches and unfamiliarity with the area make hiring a wedding coordinator the wiser and more cost-effective decision.

For the Albertsons, the distance between Savannah and Alaska demanded a Savannah wedding planner. They found Musselman's

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Website and contacted her by e-mail and telephone.

"I looked at her Website, read her information and e-mailed her myself. I really liked her from the get-go. I said, 'This is the one for me,'" said Claire Albertson.

Typically the wedding coordinator will meet with the couple by phone or in person early in the planning process to get a general idea of their vision and budget for the wedding, and then make recommendations and plan vendor appointments to minimize the stress and confusion for the bride and groom.

At least one visit to Savannah before the wedding is strongly suggested, both for do-it-yourself weddings and for those that have professional help. Two or three visits are recommended for a wedding with a longer planning window and larger guest list.

Claire Albertson made two pre-wedding visits. In February 2004 she traveled to Savannah for a week. "We were with Julie (Musselman) for three or four days. My parents also flew over from Ireland to meet Julie. It was a mini-vacation also. We made up our minds about things there and then."

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Albertson and her parents took Musselman's advice on everything "from the catering, flowers and a cake, a reception the day before at Kevin Barry's that she really helped out with, the carriage, the music, everything. I picked out my dress in Ireland and ordered it here in Alaska. Once it arrived, I overnighted it to Julie in Savannah, and she kept it there about a month beforehand."

Musselman said the pre-wedding visit depends on the client's style. "I try not to be too structured about it. Some that don't come for a planning week may have a smaller guest list or a shorter time frame, or maybe it's a very relaxed person. But some people don't have anybody to help them - then I am picking out dresses; I am doing it all."

For destination brides, the biggest advantage of hiring a coordinator might be the relationships with wedding vendors that the coordinator has developed. This holds true regardless of the size or the style of wedding being planned.

Says Musselman, "When they don't know the vendors and their reputations, that is where people rely on me the most, not only of how to get things accomplished logistically, but my contacts." Because she knows the local vendors, she can save couples and vendors a lot of time and stress by matching the bride's budget and wedding ideas with vendors that she knows can provide the desired levels of service.

"Many couples come to me and say, 'This is what I want, please find it for me.' If they only have time to interview a lot of different people." Albertson agrees. "We had to make our minds up there and then, and it was over and done with. There was no worrying about it after that. I have seen other people organizing their weddings, and it just seems to take up their whole life. We wouldn't have been able to pull it off if we didn't have Julie. She was absolutely fantastic."

