

# Piece of cake

As travel restrictions ease, destination weddings are back on the cards – but how do you sell in the current climate? **Laura French** asks the experts

**W**ith the pandemic having put paid to wedding plans for much of 2020 and 2021, forecasts suggest this year could be the year things pick up again.

As travel and testing restrictions ease, pent-up demand comes to bear and consumer confidence begins to return, operators say enquiries are trickling in – and now's the time to capitalise.

"The market for destination weddings in 2022 is looking really positive, with many couples now wanting to opt for an overseas wedding after their UK plans were put on hold or impacted by the pandemic," says Leah Marshall, director of sales at Unique Vacations UK (representative for Sandals and Beaches Resorts).

"About 30% more weddings were booked at Sandals and Beaches Resorts in 2021 than in 2020, indicating that brides and grooms are more likely to want to celebrate together overseas now."

And it's a lucrative market to target, says Natalie Bennett, partner at Off Broadway Travel. "Once you've got the bride and groom, you've then got the rest of the wedding party," she says. "Weddings mean big-value bookings."

But with ongoing uncertainty around the pandemic, there are still challenges to overcome. We spoke to a handful of specialists to get their top tips on how to sell in the current climate.

## ADVISE FLEXIBILITY

Firstly, encourage couples to be flexible on dates, says Ricky Wason, head of product and purchasing at Olympic Holidays. "With lots of wedding bookings moved from 2020 and 2021 to 2022, many venues are now fully booked so availability is tight," he says. "Next year is also starting to fill up for some of the most popular venues in Greece and Cyprus, so it's helpful if the couple can be flexible."

That doesn't totally rule out booking last minute for this year, though. "Many couples are booking more last minute than pre-Covid – often just six to eight months ahead, compared with an average of 18 months," says Jane Palikira, owner of specialist consultancy Ionian Weddings, who says there are still pockets of availability for 2022, especially towards the end of the season. "October is looking generally good, especially in Italy, where we have a large range of venues." ➤



# DESTINATIONS

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### WEDDING DESTINATIONS



**Cyprus:** Olympic Holidays says Cyprus is their top-requested destination for weddings, with paperwork in English, a wide choice of venues and minimal legalities; couples just need to arrive three working days in advance.



**Italy:** From Tuscan vineyards to Venetian palaces, Italy isn't short on breathtaking spots to say 'I do', and the wide range of venues means there's still availability for this year, according to Ionian Weddings. Minimal paperwork and zero residency requirements make it extra-simple.



**Mexico:** For a long-haul getaway offering excellent value, Tui points to Mexico, where same-sex weddings are legally recognised. Couples need to hand in documentation three working days before and have a blood test. A local wedding coordinator can arrange the details to make it hassle-free.



CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: Sandals Grande Antigua; Zante; Santorini; Sandals Royal Barbados PICTURES: Planet Holidays; Shutterstock/IVASHstudio, Profotosession, Martin Corr; Toshi Tasaki



### USE SPECIALISTS

Once the couple has found a date and venue, find out if they offer a flexible booking policy, says Bennett.

"Sometimes you have to pay quite a big deposit to the hotel to cover the food and the venue hire, so it's really important to check the details," she says. "If borders are closed and the wedding can't go ahead, will the wedding venue allow you to move the money to a later date or get a full refund? Because some venues don't."

A specialist operator can help iron out these details, with many offering free date changes; Olympic Holidays offers free amendments on weddings if bookings need to change as well as a full refund guarantee. Sandals also allows guests to rearrange their wedding for free if the UK government advises against travel to the destination.

"Booking through a specialist means couples have someone to speak to should they need to move dates and all the extras," says Mathilde Robert, managing director for Planet Weddings. "Having long-established contacts with local suppliers really helps, especially during these times."

### CHECK RESTRICTIONS

It's also essential to be clear with clients about what to expect in the current circumstances, says Palikira. "Be transparent with customers from the outset and check restrictions," she says. "Key things to think about are the limit on guest numbers and restrictions on dancing."

"Wise up on the Covid entry protocols of the relevant destination, and clarify residency requirements," adds

Marshall. "As well as Covid protocols, there are more general factors to consider; sometimes the bride and groom need to be in their destination a certain length of time before the wedding ceremony."

In Greece, guests need to be resident for at least eight days before the ceremony, for example, while several other countries require the couple to be there at least three working days in advance. In Spain, only residents can get married, but couples can have a blessing overseas if they marry legally in the UK first.

In terms of wedding paperwork, reassure clients it's the same as pre-Covid bar the forms and protocols for getting into the destination itself. "There isn't any extra paperwork, but insurance is obviously key for travel," says Robert.

### ADD EXTRAS

Covid considerations aside, it's crucial to find out exactly what the couple wants by asking the right questions, says Bennett. "The more information you get, the easier it is for you to build their dream wedding. Unlike with a UK wedding, you can't just pop into the venue and pick the flowers and the photographer, so it's important to get these details right from the outset."

Those extra details can make the day for the couple – and boost the value of the booking in the process. "Focus on added value," says Palikira. "There are so many wonderful extras that can be pre-sold to make a wedding extra special." And after two years of waiting, clients might just be looking to push the boat out a little. **TV**