

Match made in heaven

Spice up a wedding abroad with a little romance, Caribbean-style, writes Katie McGonagle

dream weddings in the Caribbean are supposed to consist of gently lapping waves, a soft sea breeze and the chance to say 'I do' with sand between the toes, right?

Or so I thought, until Ashalee, wedding coordinator at Sandals Montego Bay, explained many couples who want a ceremony at the beach actually change their minds and opt for a garden wedding when they arrive.

Surely the beach is what they come for, I wondered, until I stepped into one of the tucked-away tropical gardens to find a wedding gazebo draped in flowing, blush-pink chiffon, white blooms on the sides and chairs adorned with rose-coloured satin for the bride and groom.

Waiter Kirkland, decked out in a wedding uniform of white gloves and ivory waistcoat, appeared with a tray of mai 'tie the knot' cocktails – part of a signature cocktail list exclusive to weddings, which also includes the playful 'mint to be' mojito.

After a few minutes in these tranquil gardens I could see why some might prefer the peace and privacy here to the sea and sand of the beach. Either way, they're getting all the benefits of a destination wedding, from guaranteed sunshine and hassle-free arrangements to a honeymoon that starts the moment they've said their vows.

WEDDING PLANNER

When couples arrive, they head to the Wedding Lounge – a dedicated space showcasing options for decor and dining, plus a hair and make-up salon – for a one-and-a-half-hour consultation about their big day.

One of the hotel's three-strong wedding team then walks them through each possible location around the resort, including the gardens, indoor chapel, two beachfront gazebos and the big-ticket draw – the Over-the-Water Serenity Wedding Chapel.

It's no surprise the overwater chapel has been a big hit since it opened earlier this year, ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Over-the-Water Serenity Wedding Chapel; Oleander Room restaurant; Beachfront Millionaire One-Bedroom Butler Suite; beach at Sandals Montego Bay PICTURES: JR Delia



attracting a \$750 supplement and requiring advance booking. With a breeze drifting through its open doors and sea drifting under the glass floor below, it has all the makings of an idyllic destination wedding – and if they nab it about 5pm, couples can say their vows as the sun sets over the Caribbean Sea.

“There are no two days and no two couples that are the same,” says Sandals’ director of romance, Marsha-Ann Brown.

“We do not sell packages, we do not sell themes. What we do sell are inspirations. It’s our desire for every single bride and groom to design their wedding to their palette and budget.”

Those ‘inspirations’ take the form of different colour schemes and design motifs, from blush-pink ‘Royalty’ to the driftwood shabby chic altar of ‘Nature’ to the starfish and seashell emblems in ‘Sand & Sea’.

Couples who stay three nights or more can enjoy a ‘free’ wedding, which includes the ceremony, a bouquet and boutonniere, two-tiered cake, documentation,

cocktail reception and hors d’oeuvres for guests, plus a mimosa breakfast in bed and honeymoon dinner in a speciality restaurant.

About 95% of couples choose to add extras, says Marsha-Ann. “Our free wedding gives couples the opportunity to come and have their dream wedding, but they are able to customise the look and feel.”

RESORT VIBES

Once they’ve tied the knot, it’s time for the honeymoon, and with many UK guests opting for the smallest of ceremonies – often just the bride and groom – they don’t even have to wait for the speeches to be over.

Sandals Montego Bay has benefited from a refurbishment, completed in February, which added the overwater wedding chapel and cocktail bar Latitudes – an octagonal deck where guests can sit on hammocks directly above the waves and watch as kayakers flit to and fro. New swim-up suites were introduced, while the swim-up bar – which lays claim to being the first such bar in the Caribbean – was upgraded, and two restaurants

added, namely Butch’s Steak & Seafood (named after Sandals founder Gordon ‘Butch’ Stewart) and Soy, serving excellent sushi.

The Jerk Shack, a street-food-style spot, was introduced last year, offering jerk chicken and Jamaican favourites such as hard-dough bread and savoury doughnut ‘festival’.

The hotel’s 272 rooms were also refreshed with a light eggshell blue decor, accented with splashes of teal. Higher room categories feature over-sized bathtubs on the balcony, contributing to a modern, upscale feel across the resort.

Guests can use any facilities at Sandals Royal Caribbean, a short shuttle bus ride away, which embodies a British-colonial vibe that might suit older clients. It has 220 rooms and an offshore island featuring extra pools, a private beach and Royal Thai restaurant, which offers more space.

It is also one of the few spots to feature overwater accommodation, which forms the shape of a heart when seen from above – just one more sign for your clients that romance is part of the DNA here. **TW**



Look out for Sandals’ regular wedding webinars for training in what you need to know to sell ceremonies.

If guests have children, try holding the wedding at a family-friendly Beaches resort, then moving to an adult-only property for the honeymoon.

Guests not staying at the resort need to buy a day pass (\$145), allowing access from one hour before the ceremony to the end of the reception.

Ensure couples take wedding dresses or suits in hand luggage – never in the hold. A garment bag should keep them safe, and wrinkles can be steamed out on arrival.

Wedding couples get 15% off at the spa, but avoid facials and unfamiliar products in the days immediately before the ceremony.

BOOK IT

Seven nights’ all-inclusive at Sandals Montego Bay in a Crystal Lagoon Honeymoon Oceanview Luxury Room with Balcony Tranquility Soaking Tub starts at £2,369 per person. The price includes Virgin Atlantic flights from Gatwick and transfers, for travel between May 1 and June 30, 2020. Weddings are free for stays of three or more nights, with upgrades at extra cost. sellingsandals.co.uk