



6 OF THE Best SAME-SEX WEDDINGS

Laura French rounds up LGBT wedding destinations

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There's a lot to be said for saying "I do" on exotic shores – postcard-worthy views, predictably good weather and impressive savings included – but navigating those waters can be a little tricky.

That's even more true when it comes to same-sex weddings, with other legalities and issues to consider on top of the basics.

But it needn't be too much of a challenge. With a growing array of options for both legally recognised and symbolic ceremonies, there's plenty of choice for those wanting to tie the knot abroad, and you'll find locations to suit every taste – from country houses to majestic castles, sun-dappled beaches to Central Park. We've put together a list of some of the best to help simplify things.

1 NEW YORK
Why: Same-sex marriage has been legally recognised across the US since 2015, and at the heart of the LGBT scene is New York, home to Pride-loving neighbourhoods such as Chelsea, Greenwich Village and Hell's Kitchen. (San Francisco and Boston are also hotspots, while Massachusetts was the first state to legalise gay marriage in the country back in 2004).

The small print: All couples tying the knot in New York must go to the Office of the City Clerk at least 24 hours before the ceremony to obtain a Marriage License (\$35).

Book it: Kuoni recommends Central Park for same-sex couples wanting to say their vows beneath the trees. Prices with the operator start at £1,210 per couple including an outdoor location of their choice, services of a wedding specialist, witnesses, wedding officiate's fee, marriage licence and Central Park permit fee.
kuoni.co.uk

2 PORTUGAL
Why: "Portugal has embraced growing demand and has soared to become our number-one destination for LGBT weddings abroad," says Planet Weddings managing director Mathilde Robert. A short flight time makes it a good option for weddings with family and friends in tow, and whether it's an ultra-modern resort or medieval castle that sways clients, there's a wealth of venues to choose from.

The small print: Couples should arrive at least three days before to get the nitty gritty sorted, and documents will need to be translated into Portuguese (wedding planners will assist).
Book it: Planet Weddings' top recommendation for same-sex resort weddings here is Suites Alba Resort & Spa, set on a clifftop above Albandeira beach in the Algarve and offering excellent value. Couples can choose between saying their vows in the gardens or right on the sand, and there's an 'outdoor lounge' area available for exclusive hire with a bar,

reception area and entertainment space (DJs can be arranged). For £9,500 (commissionable to agents) they'll get the venue, all paperwork, a registrar, interpreter, photographer, flowers, DJ, cake, welcome cocktail and a sit-down barbecue or buffet dinner, for up to 50 guests.
planetweddings.co.uk

3 MEXICO
Why: Alongside its glittering waters and laid-back, Caribbean vibes, Mexico has a string of LGBT-friendly resorts, not least Cancun and Mexico City, which was the first Latin American jurisdiction to legalise same-sex marriage back in 2010. Several other states have since followed suit, including Quintana Roo, where Cancun, Tulum, Playa del Carmen, Isla Mujeres and other popular tourist spots are all found.

The small print: Paperwork needs to be completed three working days ahead and all UK couples require a blood test, so recommend arriving at least five days in advance. Afterwards, the certificate will need to be validated locally; a wedding coordinator can help sort it out.
Book it: Recommend Secrets Silversands Riviera Cancun for an all-out, adult-only wedding on a private beach. Symbolic weddings – including a wedding coordinator, bouquet, cake and sparkling wine for up to 10 guests – are complimentary (as with all AMResorts properties), while legal weddings are available

from \$2,559, with a judge/minister, wedding album, cake, sparkling wine, private cocktail hour and dinner reception for up to 20 people all included. Funway Holidays offers a week in a Preferred Club Junior Suite Pool View room from £1,915 per person, including flights from Heathrow on February 20 and the Wedding in Paradise package.
funway4agents.co.uk

4 IRELAND
Why: If saying "I do" among rolling green hills, shimmering mirror lakes and medieval architecture isn't enough to sell Ireland, its gay-friendly reputation should be. It was the first country to legalise same-sex weddings by popular vote (following a referendum in 2015), sparking attention from around the world and making it an excellent bet for LGBT couples wanting to tie the knot in atmospheric surrounds.

The small print: There's barely any paperwork involved.
Book it: You'll find plenty of heritage-rich venues here, from elegant Georgian mansions like Newbridge House and Farm in County Dublin to the palatial Adare Manor, set in the heart of County Limerick. But few spots are quite as iconic as Ashford Castle, located on a 350-acre estate overlooking Lough Corrib. Weddings are available at various venues here, but most popular is The Lodge, a country-house hotel set on the estate and surrounded by quintessentially Irish



LEFT:
The Lodge
at Ashford
Castle,
Ireland

RIGHT:
Secrets
Siversands
Riviera
Cancun,
Mexico



→ scenery. Prices start at €85 per head in winter including a drinks reception, five-course meal, half-bottle of wine and evening buffet. The hotel can also be exclusively hired for €5,000, if all 64 rooms are booked.

ashfordcastle.com

5 SANTORINI

Why: Santorini is a hotspot for LGBT travellers and the most popular destination in Greece for gay ceremonies, according to Ionian Weddings, and with its whitewashed villas and caldera-carved cliffs, it's not hard to see why.

The small print: Same-sex weddings aren't legally recognised in Greece, meaning couples will need to do the official marriage in another country, but symbolic ceremonies are common and hassle-free.

Book it: Ionian Weddings says its most popular venue is Santorini Sunset Beach Bar, above Eros beach. "It offers privacy and exclusivity along with the opportunity for a beach wedding, sunset photos and plenty of partying into the early hours!" says managing director Jane Palikira. Couples can say their vows either on a terrace or right on the beach. Prices are from £6,300 and include a barbecue buffet, five-hour drinks package, wedding coordinator, local fees, photography, DJ, cake and hotel transfers for up to 20 guests.

ionianweddings.co.uk

6 MALTA

Why: Malta has topped the European Rainbow Index for three years running, with marriage equality established in 2017 and gender-neutral passports introduced earlier this year as part of the destination's ongoing efforts to attract LGBTQ+ travellers.

The small print: Wedding ceremonies and documents including marriage certificates are in English and there's no minimum residency required, making it hassle-free. Couples just need to visit the Marriage Registry in Valletta or Gozo prior to the wedding to finalise legalities.

Book it: For an opulent, atmospheric venue, suggest Palazzo Parisio, an 18th-century palace once owned by Maltese nobility. Wedding ceremonies can be performed in either the gilded ballroom or in the ivy-clad baroque gardens – the only gardens outside Italy to be awarded the prestigious Grand Gardini Italiani – with a reception at fine dining spot Luna The Restaurant afterwards. Thomas Cook offers a wedding package in Malta from £1,300 including return taxis, single-tier cake and all legal documents. The operator suggests couples and guests stay at the nearby five-star Radisson Blu St Julian's Hotel afterwards to keep the celebrations going.

thomascook.com

Best of the rest

Celebrity Cruises: For couples wanting to wed at sea, suggest Celebrity Cruises, which offers legally recognised same-sex weddings in various locations on board.

South Africa: Progressive attitudes (it was the fifth country to recognise same-sex marriage back in 2005) and stunning landscapes make South Africa a

no-brainer. One&Only Cape Town and 12 Apostles Hotel & Spa are both popular venues for weddings.

Sweden: Marriage equality has been established here since 2009. For a wedding they won't forget, suggest the Icehotel (*pictured*) in the Arctic, where couples can marry in the Ice Church, surrounded by ice chandeliers and sculptures.



PICTURE: ICEHOTEL/PAULINA HOLMIGREN; TOURISM IRELAND/ERIC KELLEY; KOSTA SAVVA PHOTOGRAPHY; SHUTTERSTOCK