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Index: There is no better place than the Jersey Shore for a magical wedding day

Bride and Groom Perfect Together at the Jersey Shore

By **CRYSTAL FREEMAN**

From the \$3,000 dress to the \$25,000 estate rental and everything in between, the perfect wedding can cost a pretty penny on your budget. As a bride-to-be myself, I can honestly say my average wedding is already costing my father more than we expected. With less than one year to go, I already have my site, which costs \$17,000, a photographer that costs \$3,300, my DJ that costs \$1,500 and my tiara that cost \$50. Already I am up to a whopping \$21,850 and that's not including my dress, flowers, videographer, favors, invitations, and so on. After discovering this, I decided to find out what it really costs for a Jersey Shore wedding and what it takes to plan the perfect wedding.

When you're heading over the Causeway onto the Island, you are sure to pass some of the best wedding reception locations the Jersey Shore has to offer. Chris Vernon, owner of Bonnet Island Estate, The Stateroom and the new Mallard Island Yacht Club, knows exactly what it takes to have the perfect wedding location.

"I was at a wedding in New Hope, PA about 10 years ago when I came up with the idea for Bonnet Island," Vernon said. "The wedding location had a glass atrium, an old barn and an eclectic feel. I thought the wedding was so unique. And then I thought it could work on the Jersey Shore, but on a grander scale."

Vernon took a huge risk when he decided to go through with the

Bonnet Island Estate project. He said that it was a five-year process to create the perfect private island wedding location.

"There was a lot of angst over little details," he said. "We wanted it to be over-the-top and create the once-in-a-lifetime memory for people. The venue had a lot of Disneyland inspiration and we wanted our weddings to be second to none."

After he created the unique Bonnet Island Estate and the estate's popularity took off, Vernon ventured to another part of the Island to create something different, with a different feel, for both the bride and groom.

At first Vernon reinvented the popular Quarter Deck into a buffet restaurant last summer. It was a short-lived idea, and the business was reinvented with a new name, The Stateroom.

"The buffet wasn't as successful," he said, "so we changed it. I've always had a great interest to do weddings beyond all expectations. The Stateroom has a unique Caribbean landscape with tropical palm trees, more marble, a black and white theme, and views of the sunsets that are second to none on LBI."

Unlike Bonnet Island Estate, The Stateroom is a more cost-efficient venue with reasonable rates and rooms for up to 300 guests. Vernon explained that just this year he has over 50 weddings planned for The Stateroom and already between 40 and 50 booked for 2009. With all these weddings, you would think Vernon would be too busy for any other projects, but you're wrong. Vernon is just finishing up his third wedding facility, Mallard Island Yacht Club, at the Manahawkin entrance to the Causeway bridge. It was the former site of Margo's Marina.

"It was a no-brainer," he said. "I saw potential in Margo's and

decided to bring in a yacht club. It may have even surpassed Bonnet Island Estate, but we'll see what the public decides."

This Southern-style yacht club has taken the details of Bonnet Island and improved upon them. With a larger elevator, elegant showers, more flat-screen TVs, and room designs that will blow you away, Mallard Island Yacht Club is sure to exceed all expectations and will instantly become the wedding location of a bride's dreams – and her dad's suddenly bare bank account.

Vernon enjoys every part of what he has accomplished in the Manahawkin Bay area.

"It's a magical place to be a part of and watch it all unfold," he said. "You get to experience the Jersey Shore at its best. There is no better place to be than at the Jersey Shore, and it's great to be a part of it. I enjoy the business and enjoy creating the space. It's a passion of mine and I will go to the end of the Earth to make it stand out."

If you're looking for a reception that may be a little less expensive but will have the LBI beach feel, then look no farther than the Sea Shell Resort and Beach Club in Beach Haven. With a location right on the beach, it's the perfect wedding weekend for any beach bride on a budget. According to owner Tom Hughes, because of the tightening economy, he has not raised prices for weddings and doesn't intend to until after the economy stabilizes.

The Sea Shell is different from other wedding venues because it offers a wedding weekend get-away where guests can stay the whole weekend without ever having to leave the premises.

"The Sea Shell is completely unique," Hughes said. "We offer a destination-type wedding weekend idea. People can take

over the facility for the whole weekend. They can have their guests stay at the resort, welcome rehearsal parties the night before and hold the ceremony right here on the beach. They can even stay after the reception and have an after party until the wee hours, so that no one has to drive. We even do brunch the next day. Our guests can arrive on Friday and not have to go near their car until Sunday afternoon."

Hughes explained that he has noticed a trend that brides and grooms are demanding more elegant weddings.

"Weddings today are more elegant and completely top shelf," he said. "Our customers demand that. The Sea Shell by nature and being on the beach has a casual and laid-back feel. But our service, food and bar is over-the-top and we are definitely the premier destination in the New Jersey area. We appeal to the couple that wants an amazing experience with a casual feel to it."

And with any Jersey Shore beach wedding, you can only expect to find that casual feel but still with a touch of classic elegance.

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Besides finding that perfect location for your wedding, which in the case of the Vernon locations could cost you anywhere from \$90 per person to \$25,000 to rent an entire facility, you may just need a wedding planner to help take the load off your shoulders and keep you on budget.

Wedding planners can be there for the whole wedding process or just for the day if you choose. Either way it can help ease the transition from *bridezilla* to newlywed.

"I became a wedding planner because I knew there was a need out there for someone to help with all of the planning details for

couples and families where everyone is working full time," said Kathi Evans, wedding and event planner for All the Best Weddings and Celebrations. "Planning a wedding is very time consuming, and if you're working full time you might not have the time to get everything done the way you would like. That's where I come in."

Generally speaking, New Jersey weddings commonly range from \$25,000 to \$30,000, she said.

"First, in my honest opinion, there is no typical wedding," said Evans, who has been planning weddings for the past three years. "I feel that each event is unique. Each bride and groom brings their own perspective to their wedding."

Although wedding planning is often seen as being very stressful, it isn't always.

"It all depends on the client. I did one wedding two years ago that was 'soup to nuts' for over 200 people under a tent in the bride's parent's backyard - in just 10 weeks," she said. "That actually went very smoothly because we didn't have time to procrastinate."

One of Evans' most stressful weddings was when she had to put together a New Year's Eve wedding, from start to finish, in just six weeks. Of course, the tension usually builds the closer you get to the big day.

"I would say it's toward the end, probably the last four weeks," Evans said. "All the vendors have to be coordinated, you're still trying to round up the people who didn't RSVP, menus have to be finalized, flowers have to be ordered, final payments are due, and you have meetings with all your vendors. It's crunch time."

For those of you who still have plenty of time to plan, Evans offers a few words of advice.

"Don't stress the small stuff,"

she said. "Start with the large items, like ceremony location and reception venue, and then your large ticket items, like photographers, video and entertainment. The earlier you start, the more options you have. Once the big items are booked, the little things will fall into place."

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If a wedding planner doesn't fit into your budget, then you need all the resources you can get. There are plenty of wedding web sites to help you, such as TheKnot.com, Brides.com and NewJerseyBride.com. New to the LBI region is the up-and-coming Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce destination wedding web site. To be launched this summer, it will feature a full interactive section giving brides easy access to all the options that are available in the LBI region and connecting them with local businesses that meet their needs and budget.

"The web site will include information about licensing, officiants, venues, planners, photographers and all other chamber members that are directly involved with the wedding process, including spas, dress and tuxedo shops and florists," said Lori Pepenella, destination marketing director for the Chamber of Commerce.

"The Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce formed a Destination Wedding committee this past fall to represent the segment of business that directly supports the wedding industry," Pepenella said. "The most important charge of this committee is to promote our region as a destination to brides. Access to information is the key and the web is the most efficient and comprehensive way to share all we have to offer to local and out-of-area brides."

Pepenella said that because of the ever-growing wedding business, they feel it is only right to make a web site devoted to the industry and all the businesses that support it.

“According to the Wedding Report, the next two years will be a boom for the ever-growing wedding market, with more couples getting married than ever before,” she said. “We feel that our area has grown in the choices we can offer for wedding year round.”

According to the Wedding Report, which offers wedding statistics, there will be 2.21 million weddings in 2009 and 2.23 million weddings in 2010. It's understandable why more and more people are going into the wedding business. The Wedding Report also estimated that for 2008 the total cost of weddings in the United States would be close to \$54 billion.

With all these numbers, your head might be spinning, so here are a few tips from TheKnot.com to keep your mind on your budget and your wedding.

Of course you're excited about your engagement and your upcoming wedding, but before you plan anything, make sure you sit down and discuss a guest list. You don't want to be stuck with a hefty, nonrefundable deposit for a cozy, country cabin that fits 100 people. Then your fiancé's side of the family adds their addition and your guest list now tops 300 people. Plus by discussing your guest list ahead of time, you can figure out your budget – and whether or not it is worth inviting your second cousin Gary and his spring fling Martha to the wedding.

Although many brides feel the obligation to lose a lot of weight before their wedding, sometimes it is better if you do it slowly and the healthy way. Eating right and

exercising is the correct way to lose the pre-wedding pounds, but sometimes brides opt for ordering their wedding dress two sizes too small, forcing themselves to lose the weight before the final dress fitting. This is a big no-no! Instead, find a dress that you love in your current size and try toning up instead of dropping 20 pounds. If you make your goals more manageable, you'll be more likely to stick to them. But if you are still worried about your figure, remember that you're about to marry someone who can't get enough of the way you look.

Finally, when planning your big day, don't go over budget! Weddings can be financial nightmares for some couples, so it is always best to try to stick to your budget and get rid of things that you really don't need. As my friend Angie told me, “Anything that can be thrown away afterwards isn't worth spending extra money on.” By this she means that if the banquet hall where you are holding your reception supplies you with place cards, but they are hideous, take them anyway. It will save you hundreds of dollars that can be used toward the wedding gown that you have dreamed about but don't have the budget for, or the exquisite dessert table you love. Either way, by cutting costs on unnecessary items you can add more of a budget for items you really need – or more money saved toward your honeymoon or house.

Weddings today can be nightmares and fairytales all throughout the planning process. From budget problems to bridesmaid problems, there will be situations along the way that will aggravate you and upset you, but in the end it will all come together for that fairy tale ending every little girl has dreamed about. I can honestly say that through all my

bridesmaid and family problems, I wouldn't give it up for anything because that is what planning a wedding is all about. And on June 20, 2009 I will finally have my fairy tale ending right along the Jersey Shore.