

No matter the wedding size – get married in Tahoe



Tahoe weddings often come with a view. Photo/LTN file

By John Spinola

So you want to get married? And you want to get married in Lake Tahoe. *And* you're on a budget.

Well, let me just mention that in 15 years of me being a wedding officiant in Lake Tahoe I have never come across a couple that said, "We aren't on a budget and can spend any amount of money you can come up with." So, if you are like 99.9999 percent of the couples out there, you have a budget.

Let me start with my first piece of advice if you are on a budget – elope. Really, elope. If it is just the two of you, you will have fewer obligations to meet both monetarily and time-wise. You won't have to purchase food for people, you don't need a big venue and all the amenities that go with it. You won't have to purchase bouquets or boutonnieres for your bridal party, hair and makeup for one is less than hair and make up for a group, you don't have to offer lodging and you won't have friends increasing your spending with all of their suggestions.

If it is just the two of you, you can hire a minister, get a marriage license and I would highly recommend a photographer so you have pictures to share with people after you get back. Eloping offers more locations in the area. If you have group, you will need parking, bathrooms, seating, bridal room, etc. If it is just the two of you, there are some very nice ceremony locations here. I call them ceremony locations because they really aren't "wedding" locations. In other words, they don't work well with a group of people.

Eloping also has the advantage of increasing your free time. You don't have to cater to all the production stuff that shows up with groups – rehearsal dinner, ladies' events, guys' events, picking up people at the airport, meeting people after they arrive, etc.

Eloping allows your vision to stay true to what you want. When you involve your friends and family you will inevitably hear – you should do, you have to do, you could do, you can't do, the book says, this is tradition, I did do, I didn't do. Guests add drama, time, as well as costs.

And, yes, my wife and I eloped.

If you are like most people, you want to have guests. That is fine and I am all for it, but just remember what I have said above.

Lake Tahoe and guests

Consider a morning ceremony (11am, noon). Morning ceremonies tend to flow into a lunch reception rather than a dinner reception. Lunch is less money than dinner and people drink less at lunch than dinner. A morning time also allows any guests that live close to drive home after the reception. Earlier time slots might also be discounted because most couples want an afternoon time.

Consider a day other than Saturday. Saturday is the busiest

day for weddings. Most vendors and venues offer discounts for non-Saturday weddings. Also, lodging is less during the week. Rates for lodging go up over the weekend.

Consider a smaller guest count (50 people venues/receptions cost less than 100 people venues/receptions). Also, fewer people means less drama.

Things not to cut from your budget

Get a cake locally. I have never seen it go well when someone travels with a cake. I have seen people's car breakdown or lose air conditioning. Melting cakes are very sad. I have seen friends run late with the cake. I have seen people show up with a cake and not have any flatware or dinnerware to serve it. Also, most venues do not have a place for you to store your cake, so you have to provide your own refrigeration. Really, get a cake locally.

Hire a professional photographer. There is a saying among wedding vendors: "Friends don't let friends shoot their weddings." A professional knows you are on a timeline. They know the shots that are important and know how to get them. A professional is not emotionally attached to you or your event. They are emotional and passionate about their work and the final product they provide. I have seen friendships end because of poor quality wedding photos. I have seen friends/family get tipsy and forget that they are the "photographer" for the event. You want your friends and family to be guests and not vendors.

Have your flowers done by a florist or flower shop. You need refrigeration for flowers that is completely separate refrigeration from food. Food gases will wilt/kill flowers. You also need time to put them together and supplies to put them together.

When are you going to put yourself together if you are putting flowers together? You as a bride (or groom) must stay focused

on being the bride/groom. You cannot be the coordinator, flower person, baker, decorator. You can be involved in the choices and process, but you need to remember to be the bride/groom first. I have seen people become more of a host rather than the people that the event is about.

Some good advice

If you are flying here, ship your dress. About four to six weeks before your event pack up your dress and ship it to the local dry cleaners. They will unpack and prep your dress for when you arrive. Send it certified so you know it has arrived. This will eliminate one more thing for you to keep track of and will also eliminate the possibility of the airline losing or damaging your dress right before your wedding.

Please, please – secure your ceremony time and venue before you plan your reception time and venue. I cannot tell you how many times I have had brides call and say “I need X” time because I already have my reception planned. Start with your ceremony time.

Rent tux locally. Go to a Selix dealer in your area. Pick out a style and get measured. Tell them you are getting married in Lake Tahoe. We have a Selix dealer here. If you rent a tux from the Tahoe dealer, you only have to rent it for a day. If you rent a tux from your area, you have to rent it for the length of your trip and you have to travel with it.

Arrive the day prior. Wake up where you are getting married. I have never seen it go well when people want to drive up the day of their wedding. Consider traffic. What if there is an accident. Car troubles? If you get a late start, you cannot make that time up on the road. What if your flight is late or luggage and rental car don't go as planned? Where will you get ready for your event after you arrive. Most hotels have a check in time between 3-4pm. If your event is scheduled for 5 (or even earlier), that doesn't give you any time (or place)

to get ready. Again you really want to wake up where you are getting married.

Parents and money

All I have to say is that, "If they pay, they get a say." If possible, have your guests ship presents to your residence after the event. It will save them the hassle of traveling with a gift and you the hassle of having to bring it home.

If you are planning an event on the South Lake Tahoe, be sure to stay in South Lake Tahoe. I have seen people make lodging arrangements in North Shore and then pick a venue in South Shore that they like. You don't want to add 45 minutes to an hour in the car on your wedding day. This also applies to a North Shore event. Stay in North Shore if your venue/event is in North Shore.

If you can visit the area before hand, please do. This will give you the opportunity to meet vendors and see the locations in person (and what surrounds the locations). Please remember that it looks very different in winter than summer and also schedule your visit during the week. Most vendors will not have a chance to offer consultations on Saturday because they are busy doing weddings. Monday-Thursday work best for visits.

Look for small print on the websites. There is a lot of it. Some places don't include a license, some have the minister's fee separate from the package. Some hide a Saturday surcharge in the small print. Ask for a total price. Ask who is the minister? Who is the photographer? And ask to see samples of their work or if you can meet them or talk with them ahead of time. Use the 800 number to talk with people. It is a personal service/experience, so be sure to interact a bit with the people that will be handling your event. They should make you feel comfortable. They should also answer your questions and listen to what you have to say. There should be some kind of "click" between you.

Ultimately, do what you as a couple want to do. It is your wedding. Don't let friends or family pressure you into a large event if you don't want one. I have seen family members and friends pressure couples into events that they really didn't want. Again, people add drama and costs.

In closing

I hope the above doesn't discourage you from having a destination wedding. I just want to make you aware of the things you will encounter with planning a wedding whether here in Tahoe or where you live. I have helped many couples in the 15 years that I was doing this and 99 percent of them have been very happy with my services. (If you are in customer service you know you cannot please everyone.)

The Rev. John Spinola has been a wedding officiant for more than 15 years – which includes more than 3,000 weddings, from two to 200 guests – from formal gatherings to rock climbing.