

Wedding-bell boom



photo by Siobhan Fitzpatrick Austin Most small ceremonies at Maison Martinique are held in their intimate, private patio.

By Siobhan Fitzpatrick Austin

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Like every bride, Ashley Demko dreamed of a perfect wedding.

For her that meant somewhere tropical, far from her home in Alexandria, Va. So she started surfing the Web.

'I decided to research Florida and randomly stumbled across Vero Beach. When I saw the pictures of the Vero Beach Hotel & Spa, I fell in love,' says Demko. 'We also chose it based on reviews online of how wonderful Nikki Estes, their wedding planner, is.'

Married this past spring, the 34-year-old nurse couldn't be happier about her choice.

'The service at the hotel is outstanding. Vero Beach has such a friendly, small-town feel and the hotel is in a great location,' says Demko.

'The hotel recommended some excellent vendors in the area and it made planning everything so easy. I had heard planning a wedding is stressful, but it was so easy and didn't require much work.

'I'm so happy I decided to have my destination wedding there.'

And she's in good company. According to Allison McNeil, the director of tourism at the Indian River Chamber of Commerce, the number of destination weddings in Vero has increased significantly in the past five years – greatly benefitting the local economy.

'There has been an 87 percent increase in revenue generated by hotels and venues from 2011 to 2015,' she says.

Wide appeal

But these statistics are not a surprise, considering the concerted effort McNeil and her team have been making to attract destination weddings for the past six years.

In addition to an ongoing international publicity campaign in print and on the Web, one of their prime tactics has been to invite wedding planners from across the nation to see the town.

Their latest showcase, the Vero Beach Bridal Show & Tour, will take place on Sunday, Feb. 28 at the Heritage Center in Vero.

The impact of this focused marketing has been noticed by a host of local businesses, from hotels to bridal stores to makeup artists.

According to Courtney Bevan, the catering coordinator at Vero Beach Hotel & Spa, her hotel has definitely seen an increase in destination weddings since the Chamber's efforts began.

'About 60 percent of our couples are not from Vero,' she said, 'particularly in 2015.'

Online efforts

Bevan attributes the hotel's success to the Chamber's efforts and to the hotel's in-house marketing team, which makes sure it is visible to couples everywhere on popular websites such as TheKnot.com, WeddingWire.com, and WeddingSpot.com.

Like the Vero Beach Hotel & Spa, The Caribbean Court boutique hotel in Vero's South Beach targets the Northeast as well as other parts of the country. It has likewise benefitted from online advertising.

'We've done well with that,' says Edyta Zachairsz, the public relations manager for Caribbean Court. 'And the majority of our brides are from out of town.'

Another beachside hotel in town, Emilio and Gloria Estefan's Costa d'Este, is also doing great business with brides from out of town. Nevertheless, the majority – 55 percent – of their brides and grooms are from Vero or nearby.

Other, more affordable, destinations on the barrier island include the Driftwood Resort and The Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites.

The Vero Beach Museum also has a beautiful venue to hold a wedding or reception. And of course, there are numerous options on the mainland from McKee Gardens to Osceola Bistro to the Heritage Center to Waldo's Secret Garden.

Beauty bizs

But wherever she gets married, every bride wants to look fabulous.

And make-up artist Cindy Goetz says her business is booming, particularly thanks to visitors.

'Most of my brides are from out of town,' says Goetz who is constantly recommended by the hotels and wedding planners in town – along with her unofficial business partner, Lindsay Naffziger, who does hair.

Like Goetz, Naffziger is seeing an increase in brides coming from out of town.

'The majority of my business is destination brides,' says Naffziger. 'I've seen a significant increase in the number of weddings in Vero Beach in the last 10 years.'

She is so busy that often she will have two to three different bridal parties in one day. Sometimes she can't accommodate all the requests.

'I have clients booked all the way through the end of the year,' said Naffziger. 'They find me by word of mouth, internet, but most clients are referred by other wedding vendors.'

One of Goetz and Naffziger's happy clients was Tammie Fulford, who wed at the Vero Beach Hotel & Spa last spring.

'I was beyond belief at how amazing they both were,' said Fulford, a 42-year-old mom of two.

Makeover

Naffziger, like Goetz and others in the business, attributes the increased popularity in Vero to new construction.

'After the hurricanes, beautiful hotel resorts were built to replace damaged beachfront properties, which I believe has been a big lure for destination beach brides,' says Naffziger.

Of course, no bride would be complete without her dress.

Most out-of-town brides buy their dresses where they live. But this has not negatively impacted the few bridal stores in town including Bridal Suite South and Isabella's, a high end appointment-only boutique, where brides can enjoy a champagne luncheon with friends and family while trying on dresses.

Happy brides

Although she opened Isabella's less than two years ago, owner Melissa Patrick is having great success.

'Our business has been well received since we opened, and is really starting to take off after our first full year,' she said. 'We are starting to see more of the Vero Beach clientele, but I would say the majority of our clientele is from out of town.'

But it has been brides-to-be from other parts of Florida who drive to Isabella's and have spread the word about her special store.

'We are pretty active on social media and of course our best advertisers are always our happy brides,' said Patrick.

One of her happy brides was Leeanne Parrish.

'It was the first (dress) I tried on and it was perfect,' said the 24-year-old pre-school teacher from Fort Pierce of her selection.

Other attractions

Vero also has another major thing going for it – it's a relative bargain.

'Vero Beach and Indian River County have become a popular beach destination wedding venue because we are more affordable than South Florida,' says Allison McNeal from the Chamber.

One wedding trend that has taken off in the past decade is an increase in the number of older bride and grooms.

'What I have seen as a trend would be older brides and grooms with a smaller, more intimate guest size – no specific budget constraint though,' says Amanda Aucoin Osman, a director of sales and catering at Costa d'Este.

Another experienced wedding planner in town, Robin G. Patton, managing partner of Florida Event & Wedding Planning Services, concurs.

'There's been an increase in older weddings,' says Patton. 'And my clients over age 30 pay for their weddings. They opt for a three- to four-day wedding weekend, with their closest family members and friends,' she said.

Quaint

Whether couples are young or less so, Vero's natural charm remains the major attraction.

'I would honestly say the quaint small-town feel of Vero is what draws most people in,' says Courtney Bevan of the Vero Beach Hotel & Spa.

Demko may not have known anything about Vero Beach when she ran across the Hotel & Spa online. But her experience here was so amazing that she intends on making Vero part of her future.

'I plan to go back and stay at the hotel for vacations,' she said.

'We can't wait to take our kids one day and show them where we got married.'

The Chamber's guide, 'Come Discover Love' is available online at www.comediscoverlove.com

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