



Wedding Belles

How to get the most out of your big day

By Helen Dalley



Discovering the love

of your life is a major milestone for anyone. As Harry Burns noted in the romantic comedy *"When Harry Met Sally"*, after it finally dawned on him that his best friend Sally was the woman of his dreams: "When you realise you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible."

For most, this journey begins with a wedding, a day that for many married couples is the happiest day of their lives. Everyone naturally wants their big day to be as close to perfection as is humanly possible, and engaged couples can ensure that everything goes without a hitch by planning ahead. Good forward planning allows the bride and groom to carefully research every detail of their wedding, from the bridal bouquets and the band, to the guest list and the honeymoon. It's a complicated business that should never be underestimated.

"We require a minimum of six to nine months to plan a wedding, although we recommend that clients ideally give themselves a year," says Hong Kong-based wedding planner Evelyn Mills, founder and creative director of Marriage Maestros.

Bernard Chan, Senior Vice President at ComPass Visa, the first credit card in Hong Kong to offer wedding related services, agrees. "It's best to book the venue at least a year in advance, as auspicious dates in particular are all too quickly reserved," he says. Indeed, some couples are already booking venues for 2010 via the newly launched ComPass Visa Wedding Portal.

Ms Mills notes that the main problem couples experience is working within their budget. "It's always creative versus budget, but creativity and costs do not always go hand in hand," she laughs. Ensuring that her customers get what they want – within their monetary limits – is a challenge she thrives on. "We really cater to every

HAPPY MEMORIES

BILLY WAN, Senior Sales Manager at the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong, chose to get married in his place of work, tying the knot at the group's flagship hotel in December last year. Almost a year on, it is a day he remembers with obvious enthusiasm.

"One of the best things about the hotel is the grand ballroom, which has a huge stage and is also big on atmosphere," he says. "Plus the foyer is a great location for photographs, as the harbour views and the staircase provide the perfect backdrop."

Mr Wan chose to decorate the hotel's grand marble stairs with crystal lights for added effect. Besides having the freedom to select their own décor inside the hotel, and the arresting views from its harbour side location, the couple enjoyed a traditional Chinese banquet on their big day. "It was all delicious!" he says with a smile. "Everyone had a great time!"



The skyline view at the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong provides the perfect setting

single whim of our clients, and we try to make it fun for them. It requires a huge amount of trust on both parts. We need to be able to read them really well. The bride and groom should both be happy and relaxed, not worrying about little details."

That is often easier said than done in Hong Kong, where weddings can present more challenges than in other countries. For example, wedding dates have to be booked more than a year in advance to guarantee auspicious dates and the availability of the desired venue for the banquet. Weddings also tend to mix traditions from both the East and the West, so the big day may feature a flowing white wedding dress and matching bridesmaids as well as a series of Chinese rituals such as the traditional picking up of the bride and the tea ceremonies.

And let's not forget the banquet, which may include hundreds, even thousands of guests. According to an online survey by the ESDlife wedding portal, Hong Kong's most comprehensive source for wedding-related information and services (wedding.esdlife.com), the average Hong Kong wedding banquet now costs HKD140,200 (USD17,975). The survey also revealed that the to-

tal amount of money spent on weddings in Hong Kong in 2008 would be a staggering HKD11.2 billion (see tables on Pages 14 and 15).

Once a couple has made the decision to get married, they will need to think about how they will finance it, which is where ComPass Visa comes in. The co-branded credit card of DBS and Hutchison Whampoa, the card offers exclusive merchant promotions, ComPass Dollar instant cash rebates and financial consultation services. In addition to enjoying ComPass Visa's many benefits, couples can also log onto the ComPass Lifestyle Club (club.compassvisa.com.hk).

Launched this year, it is an online portal specifically aimed at young couples, and is the first in Hong Kong to combine wedding-related information with innovative online tools and a variety of financial services within one online platform. The banquet search, for example, provides members with details of over 450 different wedding venues, and the budgeting tool allows couples to keep an eye on every area of spending, from invitations to the honeymoon (according

Wedding traditions from around the world

Chinese

☞ The colour red is a central theme, signifying love, joy and prosperity. The bride's wedding gown is often red, as are the wedding

invitations and wedding gift boxes or envelopes for cash gifts. Even the bride and groom's homes are decorated in red on the wedding day.

☞ It is auspicious for the wedding ceremony to take place on the half hour. This way, the couple can begin their new lives together on an upswing.



❖ Just after the ceremony and before the wedding reception, the bride serves tea to her new in-laws in a formal ceremony.

Korea

❖ After the newlyweds have exchanged their vows, the groom's father throws red dates at his daughter-in-law to bring her luck in fertility.

Thailand

❖ The bride and groom sit together on the floor, each with their hands pressed together, fingers pointing up under their chins. The

couple's hands are also linked by a chain of flowers. The oldest relative dips his hands in a conch shell containing water. Parents and guests then do the same.

to ESDlife, the average wedding budget in Hong Kong is HKD234,00). For those looking for a little extra cash, application forms for credit cards, loans and mortgages are also available online.

"The budget calculator lets couples regularly check if they are still on budget. In essence, it's a one-stop shop for all things wedding-related, meaning that couples don't have to go from one merchant to another to evaluate their services and their respective costs," Mr Chan explains. "Members can even send out 'e-vites' to their wedding via the portal, but one of the most popular aspects of the site is the guest seating planner, which allows members to work out the best seating arrangements for their wedding guests."

The Phase II enhancement has just been rolled out, and one new initiative that members will be able to benefit from is the Wedding Angel, a hot-line service offering advice on all things wedding-related. A chat room is another feature that may be added at a later date, so members can compare wedding notes with other couples.

Another developing trend is location, as the regulations have been relaxed in Hong Kong to allow couples to get married in places other than traditional registry offices and churches. According to ESDlife, about 12 per cent of couples now prefer to have their wedding ceremony in a hotel.

One hotel group that has plenty of experience in catering for wedding parties is the Harbour Plaza Group, which has hotels in several areas across the city (North Point, Hung Hom, Whampoa Garden, Tin Shui Wai and Tsim Sha Tsui).

"We're most busy with weddings around September to December because of the good weather, and also before Chinese New Year. That is our peak season, particularly the month of December," says Director of Catering Ada Ho, who is based at the group's flagship hotel, the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong in Whampoa Garden. "We also offer competitive packages during our low season to entice couples, so it can make financial sense to consider getting married off season."

Based in Hung Hom, the Metropolis Harbour Plaza's major selling point is its outdoor marquee, whereas both North Point and Tin Shui Wai Resort

HK WEDDINGS: BIG BUSINESS

	2008 (HKD) in millions	2007 (HKD) in millions	Increase
Banquet	6,660	5,270	26%
Honeymoon travel	1,300	990	31%
Pre-wedding photo	870	960	-9%
Jewellery	830	620	34%
Gowns rental/purchase	440	620	-29%
On site photography			
video shooting	380	540	-30%
Make up and			
hair styling	240	350	-31%
Venue decoration	150	200	-25%
Others	250	390	-36%
Wedding Market	11,120	9,940	12%

Data is based on ESDlife's online survey of 1,738 people preparing to get married in 2008-10.

*∞
The
budget
calculator
lets couples
regularly
check if
they are
still on
budget*

City have sizeable grand ballrooms. "Our flagship hotel in Whampoa Garden also has an impressive grand ballroom, with high ceilings; it's pillarless and, at 4,500 square feet, it's a great space that's able to accommodate a lot of people," says Ms Ho. "Then there's our famous marble staircase with a stunning harbour view. Many couples don't ask about the capacity of the ballroom once they've seen this. They select us purely on this feature."

Most couples also request the hotel's help when it comes to planning other aspects of their wedding and, from the photography to the wedding gown, this is a service the hotel is only too happy to assist with. "We have to build a very good relationship with merchants and we are on hand to give our clients suggestions with anything wedding related," says Ms Ho.

In a vibrant city like Hong Kong, trends are always changing, even when it comes to weddings. "Clients are becoming more environmentally aware; they don't want to have shark's fin soup on the menu, so we have to give them alternatives," she says. "For the banquet, many couples take a 'fusion' approach; they may follow the traditional menu for the main course, but then have a dessert buffet, for example, which the chef can design according to their culinary tastes."

Philippines

As a symbolic promise of faithfulness and prosperity, the groom presents his bride with 13 gold coins which have been blessed by priests.

England

The term honeymoon comes from the tradition of the bride drinking mead (a fermented drink made of honey) to encourage fertility.

Colombia

The bride and groom each light a candle, representing their lives. They then light another candle and blow out the other two.

Denmark

The groom disappears during the reception so the unmarried young men can kiss the bride – then the single girls kiss the groom.



The hotel also has an in-house ice sculptor, who can craft stunningly intricate displays that are personalised for each couple. Swans, hearts and the Chinese characters for "Double Happiness" are the most requested.

"We also host wedding fairs at the hotel, and we had a catwalk show and wine-tasting at our most recent one, which was held this October. Each couple that attended also left with a photo of themselves," says Ms Ho. Fifteen couples were so impressed that they booked their wedding receptions on the spot, with many more expressing interest in holding their receptions at the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong.

There is no doubt that more and more couples are choosing to say "I do" at the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong in Whampoa Garden, perhaps because the full harbour view provides the perfect setting. Its popularity is not surprising as it has been a much sought after venue for many years. For example, in 1998 the Hung Hom venue hosted the lavish nuptials of former Miss Hong Kong Amy Kwok and

actor Lau Ching-wan. And, in true Hong Kong style, a host of press photographers descended on the hotel to snap the happy couple and the large numbers of celebrities in attendance.

But whether a couple decides on an intimate affair for close family or a sumptuous reception attended by a host of friends, family and business associates, they should do well to remember that the wedding is just the beginning of a lovely union. For as the American writer Richard Bach, the author of the best-seller "*Jonathan Livingstone Seagull*", once observed: "True love stories never have endings."

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AVERAGE WEDDING COSTS				
	2008 (HKD)	2007 (HKD)	Increase	%
Banquet	140,200	110,900	29,300	26%
Honeymoon travel	27,400	20,900	6,500	31%
Pre-wedding photo	18,200	20,100	-1,900	-9%
Jewellery	17,500	13,100	4,400	34%
Others	30,700	44,000	-13,300	-30%
Total Wedding Expense	234,000	209,000	25,000	12%

Source: ESDlife survey

Finland

• The unmarried girls dance around the bride, who wears a golden crown and a blindfold. The one she places the crown on will marry next.

Fiji

• It is traditional for the man to present the bride's father with the tooth of a whale, which symbolises status and wealth.

Hawaii

• To symbolise love, the bride and groom are decked out in flower leis consisting of 40 to 50 fresh flowers strung on a colourful ribbon.

Germany

• To bring good luck, some days before the wedding friends smash old porcelain on the ground in front of the bride and groom.