



Mexico's pristine beaches and festive culture more and more couples are crossing the coolest venues, prettiest photo ops and best

have long lured honeymooners. But lately, border for the wedding itself. Read on for the group adventures south of the Rio Grande.

MEXICO!

by JACKIE CARADONIO

Clockwise from top left: Riviera Maya I do's; authentic sombreros make for fun reception props; a tortilla maker place cards for an event on *la playa*; mariachis and hand-rolled cigars; a photo session in Riviera Nayarit; lanterns

in the Mexican Caribbean; evoke a festive feel with tequila, Spanish lace and Day of the Dead masks; sand-dollar and chair signs at Hacienda Cocina & Cantina in Los Cabos; Spanish hand fans and fish tacos add a local touch.



How do we love Mexico? Let us count the ways: zesty tequila, lively mariachis, diverse landscapes from desert to rainforest to beach ... Whether you want a ritzy rendezvous or a barefoot bash, Mexico can accommodate. Its range of resorts satisfies every budget; fun group outings run from whale-watching to cave snorkeling; and local touches (churros, anyone?) elevate weddings from good to *grandísimo*.

BEST FOR CULTURE

RIVIERA NAYARIT

Tradition and sophistication merge at this Pacific Coast haven just north of busy Puerto Vallarta. From the sleepy fishing village of Sayulita to the swanky resorts of Punta Mita, Riviera Nayarit is a top pick for couples looking to marry the beauty of Mexico's beaches with authentic culture.

FULL-SERVICE RESORT Nestled on Banderas Bay's powder-white sands, the 173-room Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita hosts some of the area's most stunning weddings, thanks to accomplished onsite wedding coordinators, scenic event spaces from beaches to the Tamai Garden, and a diverse range of activities, including a Jack Nicklaus golf course and a luxe Apuane spa. *Rooms from \$485.*

BOUTIQUE RESORT Set along a steep cliff overlooking Sayulita Bay, the 42 one- to three-bedroom villas at Hotel Villa Amor feel like private Mexican mansions, highlighted by mosaic tiles, colonial-style iron doors and verandas with brilliant ocean views. Weddings can take place on the beach, in a historic courtyard surrounded by *palapas*, or in the "kissing garden" (great lawn). *Villas from \$115.*

INDIE VENUE With three sparkling pools, a palm-lined beach, and expansive ocean and mountain views, Martoca Beach Garden in Bucerias, along Banderas Bay, is the perfect spot for nature-loving couples. Follow a beach ceremony with a poolside cocktail hour and sunset reception for 15 to 300 guests. *Rental fee from \$1,500.*

PHOTO OP For a romantic photo shoot with a touch of mystery, Mexico photographer Jillian Mitchell's favorite spot is the historic Lo de Marcos cemetery, filled with massive stone archways and beautiful ruins 20 miles north of Punta Mita.

LOCAL TOUCH Keep your reception dancing fueled with Mexico's sweetest treat, the churro. Local wedding planner Kristee Smith recommends bringing in a festive cart that serves the deep-fried cinnamon-and-sugar dessert with ice cream and gooey toppings such as caramel and chocolate sauce.

GROUP ACTIVITY Gather your clan for a prewedding horseback ride through the jungle, coastal area and Sierra Madre Mountains with My Vallarta Experience tours. After fording rivers and following streams, take an afternoon swim under a waterfall.

Traditions for Two

INFUSE EVEN MORE CULTURE INTO YOUR FIESTA WITH THESE MEXICAN WEDDING CUSTOMS.

IN THE LOOP Incorporate a traditional Mexican wedding lasso into your ceremony. Typically made of white ribbon or decorative beads, the loop is placed around the couple's necks in a figure-eight and represents the everlasting bond of love.

GOLDEN HOUR In the traditional golden-coin ceremony, the groom presents his bride with 13 gold coins that have been blessed by a priest. The exchange symbolizes the couple's mutual trust and devotion.

ANCIENT PRACTICE Opt for a Maya ceremony, a shaman-led ritual that channels the universe's four elements: earth, fire, water and air.

HORSEPLAY Historically, a groom arrived at the ceremony on horseback, and at the end of the evening, he led his new bride home in a horse cart. For a more luxurious take, use a horse-drawn carriage instead.

FLOWER POWER In the bridal bouquet, include Mexico's national flower: the indigenous pink dahlia pinnata, a relative of the daisy that resembles a bright pinwheel.

BEST FOR GLAMOUR

LOS CABOS

Equal parts glamorous getaway and laid-back retreat, this Baja Peninsula paradise, located where the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Cortez meet, lures regular visitors like Jennifer Aniston and Jessica Alba. Arid weather, super-fresh seafood and ritzy resorts will please your guests, and you'll love the wide variety of wedding sites, from hotel terraces and tropical gardens to jaw-dropping cliffs and miles of unspoiled sand.

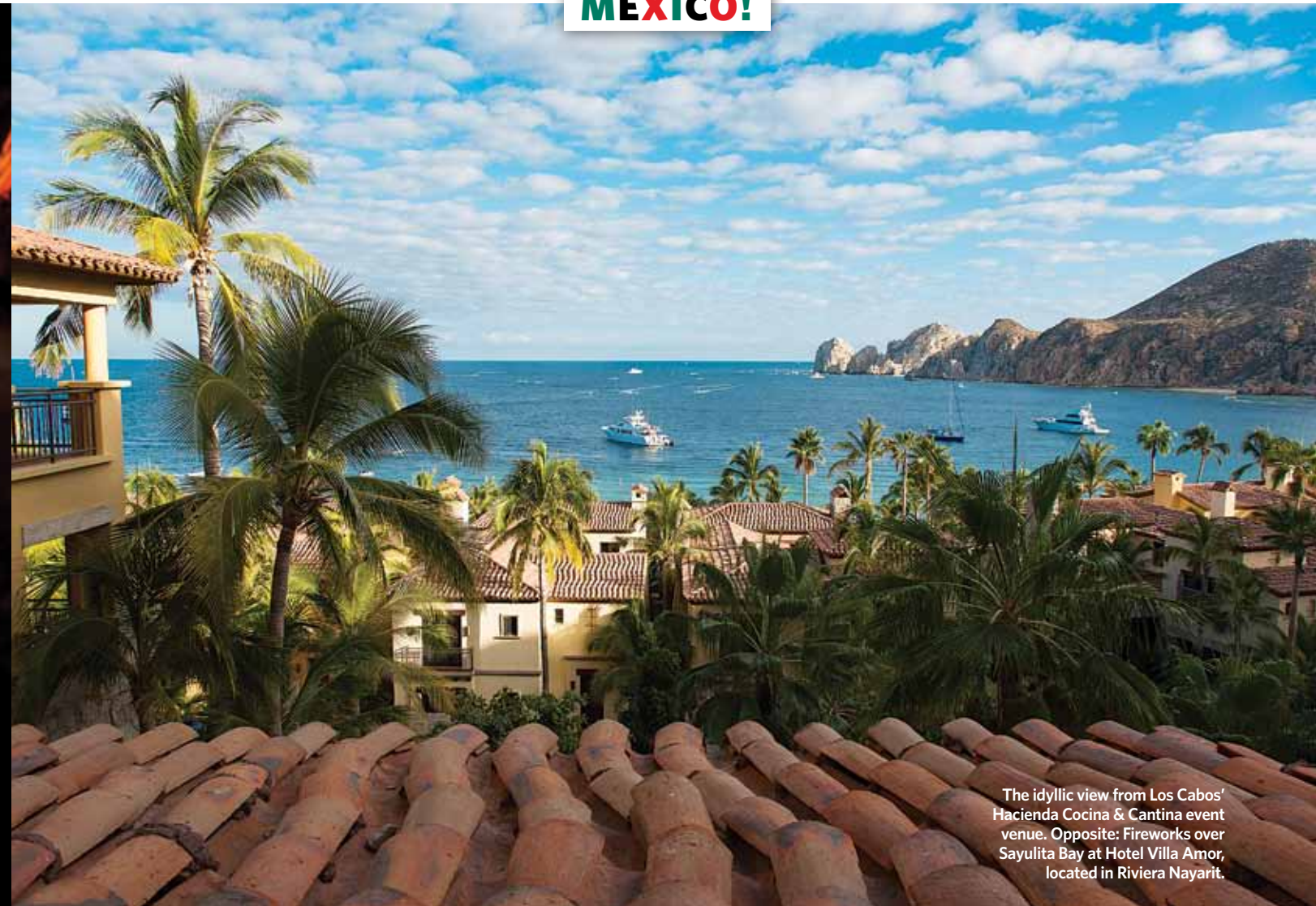
FULL-SERVICE RESORT Colorful artwork, hacienda-style architecture and palm-studded courtyards make the 375-room Hilton Los Cabos Beach & Golf Resort in Cabo San Lucas a great choice for couples who want to infuse local flavor into every aspect of their big event. Your day can be intimate or lavish (10 to 800 guests) with options such as two grand ballrooms and several lawn and beach sites overlooking the Sea of Cortez. *Rooms from \$165.*

BOUTIQUE RESORT Saying I do at gorgeous Capella Pedregal affords you exclusive surroundings: The only road access to the resort is via a secret tunnel carved through a mountain. A mere 66 rooms — each with its own private plunge pool — are nestled within the 24 mountainside and oceanfront acres. Exchange



Lori Reich and Justin McLellan held their big day in the Riviera Maya.

LA DOLCE VITA STUDIO



The idyllic view from Los Cabos' Hacienda Cocina & Cantina event venue. Opposite: Fireworks over Sayulita Bay at Hotel Villa Amor, located in Riviera Nayarit.

Warm weather, fresh seafood and ritzy resorts will entice your guests, while you'll find a

vows on a cliff overlooking the Pacific; then hold your reception at the Beach Club or on El Farallon hillside terrace. *Rooms from \$650.*

INDIE VENUE Set along a secluded stretch of El Medáno Beach overlooking the Land's End rock formation, Hacienda Cocina & Cantina offers 10 different event spaces (seating 35 to 300), all with atmospheric colonial decor such as hand-painted vaulted ceilings and wrought-iron chandeliers. *Weddings custom.*

PHOTO OP Downtown San Jose's historic buildings and colorful walls make the perfect backdrop for a vibrant portrait session. Jerome Dieu of Ana and Jerome Photography especially loves the arts district for its funky galleries and cafes.

LOCAL TOUCH Nothing screams "Mexican wedding" more than a mariachi band. *DWH* A-List Planner Sarai Flores of Signature Mexico wedding designers swears by Mariachi Mi Tierra, a 10-man ensemble that dons the traditional silver-adorned pants, fluffy bow ties and matching sombreros. Have the band strike up during the recessional and continue playing throughout cocktail hour.

GROUP ACTIVITY Shake off prewedding jitters with a yacht party. Set sail on one of Pisces Yachts' glass-bottom boats to Los Cabos'

iconic Arcos rock formation and Lover's Beach for snorkeling, whale-watching and sunbathing.

BEST FOR ADVENTURE

PUERTO VALLARTA

One of Mexico's most popular destination-wedding locales, this Pacific Coast retreat first established itself as the ultimate beach getaway in the 1960s, thanks to an appearance by Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton — and the tailing paparazzi. Today, the region might not be quite so undiscovered, but its appeal persists with luxurious hotels, a serious foodie scene and excursions galore.

FULL-SERVICE RESORT Tucked away on Banderas Bay, the 337-room Dreams Puerto Vallarta is close enough to the city to take advantage of its restaurants, night life and other attractions, yet far enough away to ensure plenty of peace and quiet. More than 20,000 square feet of event space includes several beach locations and an alfresco wedding gazebo. *Rooms from \$160 per person, all-inclusive.*

EVAN KOZ PHOTOGRAPHY; OPPOSITE: DESTINATION WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHERS ANA & JEROME

wide variety of wedding sites, from jaw-dropping cliffs to miles of unspoiled sand.

BOUTIQUE RESORT The 80-room, adults-only Casa Velas resort is proof that you don't have to break the bank to get married in one of Puerto Vallarta's swankiest hotels. The Casa Velas Beach Club, which has its own private strand, can seat up to 250 for an oceanfront ceremony, while the Salon Casa Velas is a blank indoor space that can be transformed into a themed reception for up to 220. *Rooms from \$270 per person, all-inclusive.*

INDIE VENUE A private beach cove located an hour by boat from the Puerto Vallarta mainland, Las Caletas is the perfect secluded Eden for barefoot-chic weddings. Intimate ceremonies for up to 80 take place at water's edge, while ocean-view receptions occur in the Spanish-tiled, open-air restaurant. Enjoy dancing and a bonfire on the beach, and then keep the party going on the boat ride back. *Wedding packages from \$595.*

PHOTO OP Local photographer Elizabeth Lloyd's secret spot is the colorful neighborhood of Gringo Gulch, located behind Puerto Vallarta's iconic Guadalupe Church. "There's always an old man or woman just sitting in their doorway, and it's fun to include them in a photo or two," Lloyd says.

LOCAL TOUCH A Mexican wedding toast wouldn't be the same without tequila. Kristin Crawford of Dazzling Details wedding planners suggests a tequila tasting during cocktail hour, complete with an assortment for shooting (ahem, sipping) and a margarita station.

GROUP ACTIVITY Snap photos of nature's most majestic creatures on one of Vallarta Adventures' thrilling whale-watching photo safaris. Your best bet for a sighting is during the whales' annual migration through Banderas Bay, which occurs from December through April.

BEST FOR NATURE

RIVIERA MAYA

This peaceful Yucatan paradise just a few miles south of lively Cancun is known as much for its powdery white sand as it is for its relaxed vibe. Beyond the beach lies a bounty of history and nature as well, from ancient Maya ruins to freshwater cenotes and ecological parks filled with wildlife. Whether you're after discovery, luxury or just a great tan, the Riviera Maya has you covered.



A trash-the-dress shoot in the Riviera Maya. Opposite: Rich in culture, San Miguel is a top spot to honor the Day of the Dead.

VINCENT RIBON/ZASIL STUDIO; OPPOSITE: LA DOLCE VITA STUDIO

MEXICO!

FULL-SERVICE RESORT Set within the heart of Playa del Carmen, family-friendly Grand Palladium Riviera Resort & Spa is like a city unto itself, comprising 300 acres, 324 spacious rooms and a half-mile beach. Wedding packages designed by planning guru Karen Bussen include locally inspired touches such as unity sand ceremonies, sea-shell centerpieces and bouquets of indigenous tropical flowers. *Junior suites from \$157 per person, all-inclusive.*

BOUTIQUE RESORT With thatch roofs, romantic swinging beds and lush jungle surroundings, the 18-villa Zulum Beach Club and Cabins in Tulum has a Robinson Crusoe-meets-eco-resort style. Marry on the property’s isolated beach atop a rug of palm fronds; then follow with a reception for up to 250 in the open-air *palapa* restaurant. *Rooms from \$170.*

INDIE VENUE Set within Playa del Carmen’s exclusive Grand Coral gated community, the Grand Coral Beach Club is Riviera Maya’s newest wedding venue and flaunts two private beaches, plus an ocean-view terrace with a restaurant, bar and expansive pool deck perfect for dancing. Onsite chefs and other wedding specialists make planning a cinch, though couples can also enlist their own vendors. *Ceremonies from \$235; receptions from \$90 per person.*

PHOTO OP Playa del Carmen-based photographer Vincent Ribon’s favorite portrait spot is Tulum’s Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its wild beaches, shimmering lagoons and unrivaled sea views.

LOCAL TOUCH Want to add a little pizzazz to the ceremony kiss? *DWHA*-List Planner Stephanie Skiba of Cozumel Wedding Planner likes to place colorful maracas on each ceremony chair with a note that reads “Shake at the kiss.”

GROUP ACTIVITY Explore the mystical Maya cenotes at LabnaHa EcoPark with a Travel Services of Akumal snorkeling tour in the sacred water of the caves — once inhabited by ancient civilizations — followed by a thrilling zip-line ride through the rainforest.

BEST FOR REVELRY
CANCUN

This pulsating beach city along the Yucatan Peninsula has the best of both worlds, with thumping nightclubs and bustling restaurants located mere steps from pristine blue waters

and mellow sands. Great for the party animal or the beach bum, Cancun’s all-inclusive resorts and myriad wedding packages simplify planning, leaving you and your guests free to focus on more important things — like whether to nap or have another margarita.

FULL-SERVICE RESORT In the middle of the city’s hotel zone, the sleek, adults-only Live Aqua Cancun resort, with its streamlined decor, international cuisine and house DJ, is a hip departure from

neighboring hotels. A poolside terrace (seats 100) overlooking the Caribbean Sea makes the perfect ceremony spot, and receptions wow on the beach or in one of 10 banquet halls. *Rooms from \$250 per person, all-inclusive.*

BOUTIQUE RESORT Eight miles off the coast of Cancun lies picturesque Isla Mujeres, where the 62-room Isla Mujeres Palace blends the excitement of its mainland neighbor with the solitude of an upscale beach resort. Four Colin Cowie-designed wedding packages are easy on the eyes and surprisingly accessible, with a completely gratis option featuring a ceremony and dinner for up to 30 guests. *Rooms from \$171 per person, all-inclusive.*

INDIE VENUE Located along a serene lagoon just off the main hotel strip, the Cancun Golf Club at Pok-ta-Pok hosts some of the city’s largest weddings in its expansive waterfront garden, which can hold up to 450 guests. Take advantage of the onsite planning team, which can arrange everything from catering and transportation to late-night fireworks and a funky LED-lit dance floor. *Wedding packages from \$45 per person.*

PHOTO OP Michael and Jennifer Lewis of M&J Photography can’t get enough of Isla Mujeres’ stunning South Point cliffs rising above the Caribbean Sea. To arrive at the shoot in style, they recommend booking a private catamaran with Cancun Avatays Adventure Tours.

LOCAL TOUCH Add a little something for the boys: Hire Cancun CD cigar rollers to create custom stogies emblazoned with your personal label. Cigar aficionados can light up during cocktail hour, while nonsmokers can save them as souvenirs.

GROUP ACTIVITY Spend the day exploring the Ek Balam ruins on a tour with Alltournative. Unlike at the more popular Chichen Itza site, visitors here can climb the pyramids, which are nearly 100 feet tall. ■



The Best of the Rest

FROM OLD-WORLD OAXACA TO SEXY IXTAPA, THESE HIDDEN GEMS MAKE FOR SIZZLING ALTERNATIVE WEDDING SPOTS.

SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE Three hours north of Mexico City, this inland town exudes charm with cobblestone streets, colonial architecture and a camera-friendly neo-Gothic church that proves the beach isn’t the only way to wed in Mexico.

OAXACA CITY Colorful plazas, stone monasteries and rustic ruins provide an authentic backdrop to vintage-inspired weddings in this southwestern city. For an over-the-top ceremony that channels the local culture, wed in the famous golden-arched Santo Domingo de Guzman cathedral.

IXTAPA Along with its sister city, Zihuatanejo, this quiet coastal resort town is a mix of old and new, with traditional villages and ancient archaeological sites located just minutes from exotic white beaches and luxe resorts. For a most sophisticated affair, book your fete at Capella Ixtapa resort, set along a cliff overlooking the Pacific.