



A great venue sets the spirit for your reception.



# THE PERFECT PARTY PLACE

Finding the reception venue you need—and the one you want! BY JENNIFER CAMPBELL

When it comes to your wedding there are a few things you've always known: you will definitely be walking up the aisle wearing a voluminous princess-style gown, you will dance your inaugural twirl to Natalie Cole's "Unforgettable" and you'll be jetting to Maui for your honeymoon. The one thing you probably don't have a visual on is your reception venue. The place you choose will set the tone for your party, and these days, there is no shortage of places (both traditional and untraditional) to host your fete. Lisa Hanslip, owner of Calgary's The Wedding Planner, shares her advice on finding your perfect reception venue.

## WEIGHING YOUR VENUE OPTIONS

Most venues fall into two basic categories: conventional and unconventional. Conventional locations, like hotels and banquet halls, are usually full-service establishments, with in-house staff to take care of all your details. If you're crunched for planning time, these venues may be for you. Most of these establishments offer all-inclusive packages including catering, wait staff, linens and tableware, plus extras like flower arrangements, and even a free banquet room (with a minimum head count). Rose Eaton, catering manager at Saskatoon's Sheraton Cavalier Hotel, says that along with the service, these inclusive packages are what attract couples. "They know they're only going to get one bill," Eaton says, "and there won't be any surprises."

For a less traditional location that expresses your individuality, look for a unique spot, such as a museum or historical site. The magnificent backdrop these venues provide is often well worth the effort, even though unconventional places usually require more planning and flexibility than standard sites. If you choose this route, remember their priority is as a public facility: special events, like weddings, are secondary. With these venues, you are often renting only the space. Extras, such as tables and chairs, or even kitchen facilities, aren't always available. "We try to be as accommodating as possible, but we can't make many alterations to the facilities," explains Jasmine Marshall, facility coordinator at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, in Halifax. "Couples who come in are usually looking for a museum feel," she says. "They want a unique atmosphere."

Finding a unique venue will require some research. Start with one of the many online wedding directories (such as [www.weddingbells.ca](http://www.weddingbells.ca)) that list wedding services in your area. The Internet can be a great resource, saving you hours of legwork. Even the most offbeat venue will probably have a website with photos and information, such as menus and room capacity.

Other resources are friends and family, who are always happy to offer a recommendation for an especially interesting spot or a place where they've received great service. If you prefer a professional's opinion, talk with your wedding planner. Hanslip says a planner will know most of the local venues and can help you find a location to match your personality and criteria.

## VISITING THE SCENE

Once you've got a manageable list, contact the event or catering manager at each location to make a tour appointment. During site inspection, expect a tour of the main party area and anywhere else that may be at your disposal, such as gift-opening rooms, guest rooms and kitchen facilities. If possible, visit the site when



it's set up for a wedding, as it can be difficult to envision your day in an empty space, and photos don't always convey how the pieces fit together.

Ask as many questions as possible to ensure the site meets all your requirements: It's easy to get caught up in the excitement of a beautiful place and forget your practical needs! Here are some things to watch for:

- **Condition** Is the site clean and well maintained? Will any construction or repair work be completed by your wedding date?
- **Restrictions** Many unconventional locations have restrictions for things like access times, decor and entertainment.
- **Privacy** Will there be other weddings at the same time? If the facility is open to the public, could people be walking through?
- **Parking** Is there parking on-site or nearby?

## GETTING STARTED

Your wedding reception can be held almost anywhere—from a hotel ballroom to your own backyard. Pinpointing a venue that reflects your taste and style, and suits your practical needs, can be overwhelming. Before you're knee-deep in napkin rings and canapés, sit down with your beau and determine some big-picture details to help you focus your search.

## BUDGET

"The first thing you need to do is set a budget," Hanslip explains. "You don't want to fall in love with a reception venue only to discover it's completely out of your price range." Venue rental fees can range from free to over \$2,000 per day, so a budget will help you narrow the field. Realize your reception will cost about 50 percent of your total wedding budget, with the venue representing about 10 percent of this cost, but remember there is more to the venue cost than simply the charge. A banquet facility should provide all the tables, linens and dishes you'll need for the

big day, while a different site may not, which means extra rental costs.

## STYLE

Do you want a lavish dinner and dance in a fancy hotel? A luncheon in a historic mansion? A clambake on the beach? Your style is anything from the overall reception atmosphere to very specific ideas about decor or themes. Choosing your wedding style will go a long way in helping you find the right place to have your special celebration.

## SIZE

While there are a limited number of options to hold a party for 500, a smaller wedding can be held just about anywhere—although you don't want a small gathering to get lost in a large venue, so choose a space that fits. The activities you plan for your guests will determine the venue size you need. A room holding 90 for dinner may handle 200 for cocktails.

## DATE

When approaching venues to inquire about availability, have backup dates in mind. While you need to coordinate dates with your ceremony site, flexible timing can provide budget advantages. If the venue you want is only available on a Friday evening you may get a price break for an off-peak party. Begin your search early as many popular spots book up a year or more in advance.

- **Facilities** Are there adequate washrooms? Is there a bridal change room? Is the venue wheelchair accessible? Is it air conditioned?
- **Space** Is there enough room for everyone and everything you want to do?
- **Service** What is the wait staff to guest ratio? How will the staff be dressed?
- **Food** If the venue offers catering, make sure the menu suits you. Ask if they offer a tasting. If there's no in-house food service, is there a list of preferred caterers?
- **Supervision** Will there be a staff member on-site if there are any problems? If possible, deal directly with this person to avoid miscommunication.

**MAKE SURE TO GET IN WRITING ALL THE DETAILS ABOUT YOUR VENUE—DON'T RELY ON VERBAL AGREEMENTS**

## CONTRACT CONSIDERATIONS

Once you've found a venue to provide the service and style you need for a great reception, you'll have to pay a deposit (up to 50 percent of the rental cost) and sign a contract. This document should spell out all of the rental details, including the date of your event, when you can access the space and when you must shut down, which rooms you will be using, a list of what is provided by the venue and any restrictions. All of the costs, for room rental, catering and bar, service and tableware rentals, should be listed, plus any additional or potential costs, such as corkage and cake-cutting fees or overtime charges. Ensure the contract outlines the payment schedule and cancellation policy, and any insurance or permits you'll need.

"In general, the contract protects the vendor, not the client," Hanslip reports. "Have the manager go through each item so you understand what you're agreeing to." To protect yourself, make sure anything and everything promised to you is added before you sign; don't rely on verbal agreements, always get it in writing.

You know best what you want for your reception, so ask questions to make sure you will be satisfied with your choice, but don't discount your instincts. "Couples get a gut feeling when they've found the right place," Hanslip concludes. Do your homework, and you'll be rewarded with a venue that takes care of your practical needs *and* takes your breath away. **WB**