

25 ways to WOW your guests

NEARLY 2 MILLION COUPLES WILL GET MARRIED THIS YEAR. SO HOW DO YOU MAKE YOUR WEDDING STAND OUT? INCORPORATE A FEW OF THESE GENIUS IDEAS YOUR GUESTS HAVEN'T SEEN BEFORE.



BY KRISTIN KOCH

1 offer a warm welcome

You'll probably be too busy with last-minute preparations to greet all of your out-of-town guests in person when they arrive, so arrange a virtual welcome. Ask your videographer to create a brief video of the two of you that explains your wedding location and provides tips for things to do in the area, along with a rundown of the weekend's events, to include in the welcome bags.

2 impress from the start

Don't underestimate the power of nature—even if you're exchanging vows *inside*. Look to the royal wedding (recall the trees lining Westminster Abbey) for inspiration and create an indoor garden. Hang flowers from the ceiling, run ivy up the walls and dot the aisle with topiary trees.

3 switch up your seating

Intersperse regal tufted sofas with gold chiavari chairs for a glam ceremony, or seat guests on hay bales covered in fabric for a rustic affair. Lay out plush blankets and lounge pillows surrounded by oversized umbrellas for outdoor nuptials on the grass or sand.

4 share a new "you" tradition

"Creating a direct link to the couple and the things they enjoy together makes a wedding memorable," says Annie Lee, principal planner and founder of Daughter of Design. Infuse your personalities into the day by including your favorite things, like a hobby, band or author. For example, one bride sailed to the ceremony site, another couple had a jazz band they love play during the cocktail hour, and another pair named their tables after their favorite literary works.



Take guests on a journey, creating a unique theme for each part of the day. Tie it together with one palette.

5 transport guests

Take your guests to another place. Destination wedding guru David Beahm brought the spirit of Manhattan to one couple's island nuptials, creating a tented lounge in the vein of a New York supper club, complete with Art Deco elements. For Katie Lee and Billy Joel's wedding, master planner to the stars Marcy Blum gave their sprawling estate on New York's Long Island a Tuscan farmhouse feel, adorning wooden farm tables with calla lilies, sunflowers and herbs.

6 go viral with your guest book

Instead of the now nearly ubiquitous photo booth, set up a confessional-style video booth for guests to say a few words about you to the camera. Postwedding, share your guest book via YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr or Vimeo, or send guests copies with your thank-you notes. >>

7 decorate from the top down

For an unexpected and dramatic look, make the ceilings part of your décor by attaching lanterns or baskets of blooms to the support beams. Or hang floral arrangements and cascading vines over your tables. Just get permission first; some sites may prohibit this.

8 vary your timeline

Instead of the traditional lineup guests see at every wedding, mix up the standard order of events—wait until after the cake is cut to do your first dance, or start with the cocktail hour and finish off the night with a midnight ceremony under the stars. Or add some surprises your guests won't see coming: Greet them as they enter the ceremony (they'll really be shocked!), or bring out a gospel choir during the ceremony.

9 go beyond the usual floral centerpieces

"Create something guests haven't seen," says A-list events guru Preston Bailey. Instead of basic blooms, glam up your tables with pillar centerpieces of cascading crystals, floral sculptures, bloom-covered candelabras, or floral and crystal chandelier trees.

10 set the stage

Just as the altar is the focal point of the ceremony, your band or DJ will steal the spotlight during the reception, so make them stand out. If your venue doesn't have a built-in stage, rent one to emphasize the feeling of a live performance and to up the room's energy.



11 make the floor dance

Give some love to the dance floor itself too, suggests Hollywood's go-to planner, Colin Cowie, who lit the dance floor at one event with ever-changing patterns. Turn your favorite songs into an interactive art show, with lights rhythmically moving to the beat of the music.

12 mix it up

Surprise guests with unexpected offerings, says Andrea Correale, celebrity caterer and president of Elegant Affairs. Instead of a bread basket, serve bruschetta trios with different toppings. Or do a tasting menu so guests can try a variety of dishes.

13 provide first-class service

With the return of traditional elegance, seated dinners with table service are back, Correale says. Take your meal up a notch and have professional waiters with rolling carts prepare dishes tableside.

14 dress up the loo

There are fancy portable options that don't look like they belong at a construction site. Think: luxe trailers (with running water) hidden in tents. We've even witnessed porta-potties disguised in tepees lit up in the wedding colors that had guests oohing over the toilets—which we never thought we'd see.

15 give the vip treatment

"Simple, little services that make guests' experience more pleasurable can have a big impact," Correale says. Have waiters pull out chairs for every woman, or hand out wet towels so guests can wipe their hands before they sit down to eat, she suggests.

16 deck out dessert

For an elegant substitution, Correale recommends filling a cupcake tree with small dishes of creme brulee or tiramisu. Or build a dessert maze. "As guests walk through, treat them to a winding display of the most amazing sweets at every turn," Correale says.



Give guests a sweet send-off with favors they can enjoy right away. Set up a table near your reception exit and hire a few chefs to make warm beignets sprinkled with powdered sugar. Place them in pretty bags for guests to take on their way out.

FROM LEFT: PAIGE EDEN PHOTOGRAPHY; IRA LIPPRE STUDIOS. PREVIOUS PAGE: JAIME SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY



17 put on a show

Don't just choreograph a dance, master a few. Start with a classic waltz; then switch to a sultry tango or a high-energy swing routine. End with a slow and romantic number, and have fresh flower petals dropped from the ceiling like confetti. (Note: Have someone sweep them away after, so no one slips.)

18 change the scenery

Vary the setting for each event of the night: Moving guests to new spaces, each with a slightly different look and activity, will keep them continually entertained and allows for multiple wow moments. Start with an outdoor ceremony, followed by cocktails on a nearby patio, dock or roof deck, or even switch from the beach to the pool. Head indoors or to a tent for dinner and dancing; finally, lead guests into a lounge-like environment for the cake cutting, and bring in a DJ to fit the nightclub vibe. >>



5 | the knot

19 light up the night

“Lighting alone can make the biggest difference in setting the mood and creating the right ambience,” Correale says. A lighting designer can transform a room, using an overall tint (try pink or amber tones, which make everyone look great), plus uplighting to highlight certain areas. Go a step further and have different-colored lights to set different moods throughout the night. Opt for bright, cheerful lighting when guests first enter the space; go with lower, amber-colored lighting during dinner for a more serene vibe; and for dancing, pump up the energy with purple-hued lights. You can also use lighting as a décor element. For example, flash a gobo of your new monogram or a funky geometric pattern onto the dance floor, or project falling leaves or snow to add drama to a boring beige wall.

20 entertain with more than just music

Hire fire-eaters, flamenco dancers, *Cirque du Soleil*-style acrobats or a Bollywood troupe to perform. Or watch guests' faces as the classical violinists from the ceremony burst out like rock stars to jam with the band or DJ.

21 spice up your toast

Set up a bubbly bar with a variety of garnishes like strawberries and chocolates to bring out the flavor, and mixers like peach puree for Bellinis.



Send guests home with a new skill. Hire a sommelier to dish out wine-pairing tips, or set up a cigar bar, complete with an expert to teach the art of cigar rolling.

22 keep 'em on their toes

Never give your guests a chance to get bored, and ensure that they have plenty to talk about after the wedding by introducing a different element—a special act, a new course or a new event (like the cake cutting)—every 30 minutes.

23 don't make 'em wait

Have a fleet of waiters standing at the entrance to your cocktail hour, drink trays in hand, ready to greet guests with champagne. Or set up a specialty bar with a mixologist whipping up your signature cocktail.

24 go out with a bang

Do you think that the party's over once the last song ends? Not so fast. Make your final impression really count and blow everyone away with a fireworks finale or by performing the final song with the band.

25 end on a high note

Ask a few members of the band to cut out early and set up outside the exit. As your planner ushers everyone out for your big send-off, have the musicians start playing a special song to serenade guests as they leave.

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