

how to marry

LA JOLLA



california dreamin'

If there's one U.S. destination that literally has it all, from beaches and deserts to forests and vineyards, it's the Golden State. Whatever your vision, we've got the must-know tips for where and how to throw a California celebration.

BY MARYANN HAMMERS



CAMPOVIDA

WINE COUNTRY

California wine-country scenery is spectacular: Manicured vineyards hug winding country lanes, while licorice-scented fennel and yellow mustard blanket oak-studded hills. You can bicycle along rural roads lined with wild blackberries, soak in bubbling mineral springs, picnic in fields of golden poppies or soar over vineyards in a hot-air balloon.

Napa Valley is the state's best-known and most upscale wine-growing region, but great grapes grow throughout the state. North of Napa, artisanal wineries and small farms dot rural Mendocino and Sonoma counties, while Paso Robles and Santa Ynez Valley, both on the Central Coast, are notable for quaint Western towns and sunny weather year-round.

It's not just about wine, though. "Barns, farmhouses and horse ranches, which share the Santa Ynez Valley with vineyards, also serve as amazing venues," says Santa Ynez wedding planner Rani Hoover. "The sparkling lake at Alisal — a guest ranch and resort in Solvang with a big wood deck, a small boathouse and Adirondack chairs dotting the lawn — is nestled amid rolling hills."

LOW-KEY FETE Madeline Trait of San Francisco's Locally Grown Weddings looks for a venue with lots of site options for hosting various wedding-related events. One go-to: Campovida, a family-owned vineyard in

Mendocino County with a 10-room inn and professional kitchen. "There's a ceremony arbor with a vine canopy, an herb garden for cocktail hour and a Tuscan garden perfect for the reception," Trait says.

Heather Thompson and Daniel Noll, from San Francisco, rented out the entire property for their September 2011 wedding. "Almost every room overlooks the vineyards; some open up right onto them," Heather says. "Plus, we loved that the property has an organic farm and produces its own wine, honey and olive oil."

SPLASHY BASH When San Diego residents Ally Ozeryana and Amir Mokayef needed a private estate with lots of land, they toured

several with planner Kathy Higgins, who specializes in the region. In the end, Beaulieu Garden, in Rutherford, was perfect for their May 2011 vintage-French-themed wedding. "With its elegant old-world vibe, beautiful grape trellises, fountains and gorgeous vineyard views, I was sold," Ally says.

THINK ABOUT THIS Though gorgeous, winery weddings in Napa County can be challenging thanks to strict licensing. "Most Napa Valley wineries are not licensed to do weddings, except for a few that are grandfathered. Most events here take place in hotels, resorts and private estates for this reason," says celebrity planner Sasha Souza of Sasha Souza Events. "Sonoma Valley doesn't have the same restrictions, as it's not an agricultural preserve." She also points out that wineries generally can't host hard-liquor bars. "They're restricted to the wines sold by the winery, along with beer, champagne and nonalcoholic beverages. Only a few wineries own liquor licenses for events."

BEACH

With more than 200 miles of shore between San Diego and Santa Barbara, Southern California's legendary beach scene offers myriad choices, from hip to historic to ultra high-end. Opt for an upscale resort overlooking the marina in the OC, or go traditional in postcard-perfect Coronado, known for Victorian architecture and a sweet downtown. La Jolla overlooks craggy ocean bluffs, with pelicans soaring above and seals basking on rocks below. Ventura is classic laid-back Cali, with

HOTEL DEL CORONADO



TOP: LAURIE LEVENFELD/ZOOM PHOTOGRAPHY

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driftwood dotting the sand, surfers conquering the waves and shops lining historic Main Street. Or say I do in Santa Barbara, where the white stucco buildings with red tile roofs recall the Mediterranean.

LOW-KEY FETE LA couple Kimberly Stirdivant and Roger Wason wanted the Pacific as the backdrop but worried that the older members of their family would have difficulty traipsing on the sand. The solution? La Valencia Hotel, in La Jolla. For their August 2011 ceremony, they chose a garden with an ocean vista, lush bougainvillea, tropical flowers and a grassy lawn. “We could see the water and smell the ocean air,” Kimberly says. “After the ceremony, we walked to the beach for pictures.”

SPLASHY BASH For a statement wedding, Kelly Aull of Mint Weddings, in San Diego, suggests the iconic Hotel del Coronado, originally built in 1888 on Coronado Island, just off San Diego. “Brides love the Victorian grace, charm and opulence,” she says. “The Windsor Lawn offers unobstructed beach views without the messy sand, and the ocean view through the grand ballroom’s wall-to-wall windows is amazing.” The hotel can also throw in sweet touches like s’mores on the beach, complete with a fire pit and chairs, perfect for welcome parties.

“You don’t need decor to make a visual impression; the natural setting does that on its own.”

THINK ABOUT THIS California beach weather is unpredictable. It can be warm and sunny year-round, but when the fog rolls in, it can get downright chilly (even in summer). “An 80-degree day can quickly turn into a 60-degree evening,” says Los Angeles wedding planner Wayne Gurnick. “Be prepared with oversize umbrellas to shade from the heat and cozy fleece blankets if it gets cool.”



PALM SPRINGS

Beach restrictions are another key factor to keep in mind. “Every community has different regulations,” Gurnick says. “Permits may be required; there may be limits on the number of guests or restrictions on amplified sound. Usually, alcohol is prohibited.” Check with the city where your chosen beach is located before committing.

Muscle Beach, a Santa Monica landmark, is popular because no permits or fees are required for events of 150 or fewer people. With its historic wood pier and brightly lit Ferris wheel, the location makes for stunning photos, and guests love the LA vibe — bicyclists and in-line skaters, 1930s gymnastic equipment, and the TV and movie crews that are a near-daily sight.

Even on Muscle Beach, however, fire, cooking, glass containers and alcohol aren’t allowed, so after swapping vows, most couples move the festivities to a local resort, such as the adjacent Loews Santa Monica Beach Hotel, where the Venice Room — featuring floor-to-ceiling windows facing the beach and pier — and oceanfront pool deck are favorites.

DESERT

When most of the country shivers, Palm Springs and neighboring Coachella Valley resort towns bask in glorious sunshine. But warm weather isn’t the only draw to this sexy desert playground situated 100 miles east of LA. Framed by cloudless blue skies and stark

mountains, the Palm Springs area flaunts a glam ’60s vibe, midcentury architectural gems and a broad range of lodging choices, from mod period hotels to lavish resorts.

And it’s not just about hotels. The town was once the favorite vacation spot in the golden age of Hollywood, and today you can rent estates that once belonged to celebs like Marilyn Monroe, Lucille Ball and Frank Sinatra. Sinatra’s former home, Twin Palms, is one of the best. “It honors the Rat Pack era with period furnishings and midcentury-modern architectural elements, like a piano-shaped swimming pool and a pool house with a built-in bar,” says Amy Vargas, owner of San Diego-based First Comes Love Weddings & Events.

LOW-KEY FETE For small weddings, San Francisco-based wedding planner Amy Kaneko recommends the sexy Korakia Pensione, in Palm Springs. “It’s an intimate 28-room inn with grand Moroccan wooden doors, gorgeous tile work and eclectic antiques from around the world.” The space encompasses two historic villas, a waterfall and a stone fountain, and a courtyard with citrus, olive and date trees — all ideal for photo backdrops.

SPLASHY BASH The hacienda-style 796-room La Quinta Resort & Club, 30 minutes southeast of Palm Springs, is typical Old California, with flower-lined walkways, splashing fountains and cactus gardens surrounding whitewashed adobe casitas with red tile roofs



EVERGREEN LODGE

and blue doors. It's also loaded with Old Hollywood pedigree. "On the lawn where Ginger Rogers was married, there's a trickling waterfall and shade trees," says Wendy Dahl, owner of Palm Desert-based Chic Productions. "But my favorite venue is La Casa, a villa once owned by Greta Garbo. The building is private, the grounds lush, and the sun sets perfectly behind the ceremony location."

THINK ABOUT THIS Desert climates are extreme, so pick your date carefully. "April and early to mid-May are ideal for weddings, as is October — and those months quickly get booked," says Kaneko. Though with the summer heat come lower rates and warm nights.

To contend with the intense sun and heat, Gurnick suggests creating a guest-preparation station at the ceremony spot, stocked with parasols, fans, water and sunblock. Lavender- or rose-scented hand towels, frozen ahead of time, are also a welcome refresher. Avoid peak afternoon heat by planning a wedding brunch or a service just prior to sunset.

WILDERNESS

Outdoorsy types and adventurers adore the beauty of California's epic open spaces, from redwood country just north of San Fran to the

pristine waters of Lake Tahoe, the largest alpine lake in North America. National parks are a great option, and California has more than any other state. Take Yosemite National Park; one of the nation's oldest preserves, it makes a great venue year-round. Planner Sandra Di Domizio of Green Fox Events, in Mammoth Lakes, favors the Eastern Sierra Mountains. "Venues range from mountain lookouts and ski lodges to secret spots on Forest Service land." In winter, "you can tie in a welcome ski, a trash-the-dress snowboarding session and a farewell mountaintop brunch." In summer, outposts like Yosemite-area Evergreen Lodge can organize hiking and biking excursions. "And at night, there are outdoor movies and campfires," says Jessica Gorman, event manager at the lodge.

Another bonus: With a grand natural backdrop, "you don't need decor, centerpieces and table dressing to make a visual impression," says Gorman. "The natural setting does that on its own" — think meadows with wild lupine and a natural canopy of sugar pines.

LOW-KEY FETE With fern-carpeted forest trails, coastal bluffs and waves crashing over rocks, the Mendocino region (some 150 miles north of the Bay Area) is sometimes

called California's Lost Coast because it's so remote, rugged, undeveloped and unpopulated — which is what appealed to Pati Brown and Ryan Todd, both from Sacramento. The Todds planned their big day with help from the owners of Glendeven Inn, a historic B&B nestled between the redwoods and the coast near Van Damme State Park. "The inn offered a perfect package, personal service and rural elegance, plus accommodations in a private 150-year-old restored cottage," she says.

SPLASHY BASH For their outdoor wedding in August 2010, Julie Flannery and Marc Rizio married on the shores of South Lake Tahoe, a 10-hour drive north from their San Diego home. "South Lake Tahoe offered something for everyone: fun in the sun, water sports, boating and hiking trails," Julie says. "The beauty of the lake, surrounded by majestic mountains, added to the moment." Following the service, gondolas whisked guests to 8,200 feet for a reception at Lakeview Lodge. "We ate, drank and danced the night away with a 360-degree mountaintop view," remembers Julie.

THINK ABOUT THIS If you choose to hold your event in a state or national park, "inquire whether your chosen state park requires a photography permit, as most do," says LA photog Johanna Jacobson of Ambientimage. "Make sure your photographer carries the correct liability insurance to qualify for the permit."

Also, at these public venues, parking may be expensive for guests, lighting may be a challenge, and bathrooms may be unimpressive. "Consider stocking restrooms with hand soap and flowers," suggests Nevada resident Natasha Bourlin, who wed Christopher Christiansen in September 2011 at Sugar Pine Point State Park, located on the west shore of Lake Tahoe.

And choose your season carefully. Optimal summer weather brings loads of tourists at popular parks like Yosemite; Tahoe sees peak visitors during the winter ski months. You'll compete with crowds less in spring and fall, but weather can be iffy. "I advise summer for state-park weddings, as regulations may prohibit tents for shielding from wind and rain," Bourlin says. At her own fall wedding, she experienced some light drizzle. "But," she laughs, "I considered the spattering of raindrops to be good luck and happy tears." ■

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