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5 Wedding Venue Must-Haves

By Kelly Chandler, Wedding Venue Consultant

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1. IT'S ALL IN THE GETTING READY

Long gone are the days when the wedding day starts with the ceremony. The "getting ready" and prep time for both sides of the wedding party is as much of the wedding rite of passage as the ceremony/reception itself. Those "squad" photos with matching dressing gowns, clinking glasses of fizz, the anticipatory high-vibes of preparing for what's ahead and spending quality time before the event has almost become as much a wedding essential as say having professional photos at your wedding.

Smart venues have embraced this in their offering and how they present weddings, often providing a dedicated getting-ready space, increasingly this being beautifully kitted out with mirrors, furnishings, hooks and hangers amongst other facilities. This has historically been marketed towards the bride, however, progressive venues have recognised that there are two parties involved in a wedding (and that does not always involve a bride of course). Both parties deserve to be treated equally as the VIPS that they are on the day.

More venues looking to keep ahead of expectation are using the opportunity to create and market two separate prep experiences, keeping those gender neutral or gender flexible in most cases.

2. ACCOMMODATION

Staying over is very much the wedding norm for a vast majority of weddings going into 2023. It's not tied into necessarily the geography of where couples and guests live and the logistics of being able to travel home. Increasingly, the experience of staying over and extending the wedding experience is highly valued. Couples want their wedding to be longer than a few hours of celebration and the "getting ready" plus staying over with their nearest and dearest is highly coveted.

Venues have been experiencing this demand for more and more accommodation for quite a few years now and many have added additional capacity to accommodate guests, whether it's permanently built bedrooms, rustic-style cabins, shepherd's huts or temporary pop-up wedding camping or glamping villages.

The sweet spot of accommodation is around the 15 to 20 bedrooms mark in my experience, which for an average wedding size of 80 is generally easy to fill with bridal party, key family and close friends.

A larger quantity of accommodation can work but in many cases pushes the budget to a higher price point creating a more niche target market, even if the accommodation component is passed onto guests to pay, which is very much the norm in all but the most luxurious of weddings.

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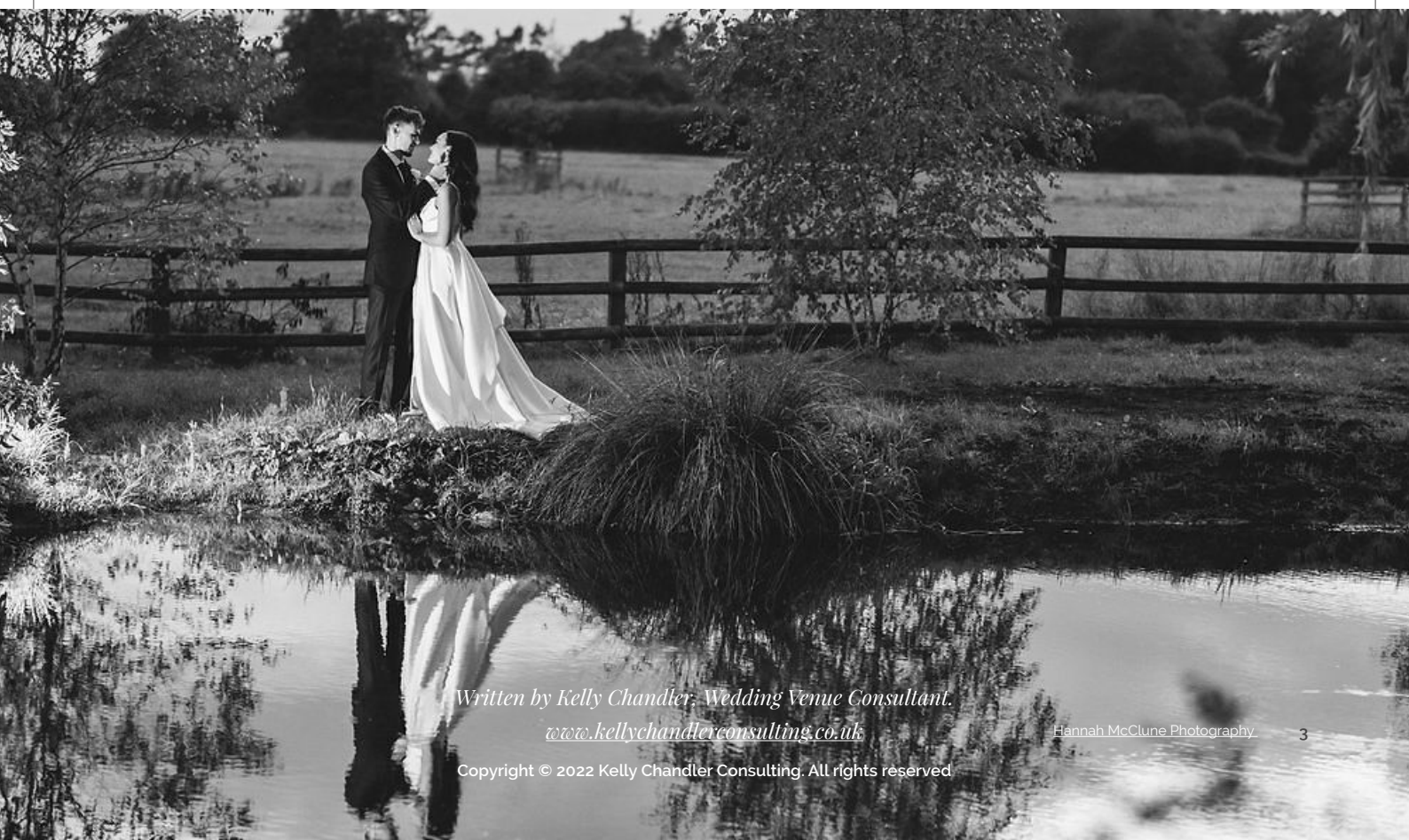
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3. STICKING POINT OF TURNOVERS

The customer demand of getting ready and staying over with extended wedding days is all well and good but – as many venues that operate a back-to-back wedding operation know –this provides challenges of overlapping clients with one wedding wishing to get into prep and the other wanting to lounge over a relaxing breakfast and departure.

Across the market I'm seeing more clever creation of secondary spaces that allow entirely separate night-before and prep spaces away from the key wedding host location or similarly dedicated accommodation areas for the night of the wedding with purposely created post-wedding-day breakfast locations so that the two locations can operate at that switchover point but no more than one wedding is hosted on the key wedding day. (As a separate note - whilst operating more than one wedding at a venue per day used to be very normal, it's very much reduced these days in line with customer expectation for exclusive-use or partial-exclusive use).

Some venues have specifically created business models that purposely make the extended stay part of their offering but stopping short of the full-weekend business model. So offering a rehearsal dinner and wedding day for Thursday and Friday couples and then the Saturday wedding with relaxed Sunday brunch to a second couple. These experiences are priced more highly than a pure one-day wedding but at a more attainable price point than a multi-day weekend hire, which would otherwise take out key wedding days. Clearly this doesn't necessarily work for a venue that prefers to operate each day separately but can be a good strategy for venues with accommodation wishing to host fewer weddings at a higher price point.



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4. DEVELOPMENT OF THE OUTDOORS

Given a very large thumbs-up during the pandemic, I'm seeing development of outdoor spaces at an all-time high by progressive venues and in consistent demand by couples.

Outdoor wedding ceremony spaces have long been popular but have now been given a much appreciated boost (in England and Wales) by the extension of licensing of registrar-led ceremonies outdoors, which brings the ceremony possibilities in line with much of the rest of the world.

However, it's the other al-fresco spaces that are getting a lot of focus and attention and I'd urge looking at if you're not already and are looking to improve and grow your venue's success:

The likes of :

- The al-fresco bar set-up,
- Outdoor lounge and cabana seating
- Outdoor nooks, cabins, undercover firepits
- The outdoor festival-vibe food stations
- Outdoor play areas, not just for children but for adults too
- Increased use of marquee structures, particularly stretch tents, open-sided sperry tents and transparent roofed marquees. These give flexibility for the weather (with its associated challenges at times!) but still allow an element of outdoors in.

On-trend ceremony spaces

Impressive stand-alone outdoor ceremony spaces that go beyond the simple wooden wedding gazebo and that take in a more bespoke architecturally impressive design such as incorporating unusual angles, pentagons, octagons etc.

Structures that are often built with high ceilings, using local timber, sometimes a mix of timber, glass and steel for a more industrial look; sometimes mixing up rustic with glam with the use of internal chandeliers but importantly an air of permanence and space to host ceremonies with an outdoors-in vibe, whatever the season and weather.

Whilst weather will always be a factor, customers across the world have gotten used to socialising al fresco, have been exposed to some quirky overhead cover and inventive ways of being outdoors and are looking for venues that offer this opportunity for their wedding.

Light it up

Clever atmospheric lighting is not just going hand in hand with such outdoor spaces from a practicality point of view (in terms of movement after dark) but also from a mood and ambience perspective, too, such as lighting of peripheral trees, feature trees and feature seating/socialising areas.

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5. FOOD SERVICE STYLING

Festival rules

Hand in hand with the development of the outdoors – over the past few years – comes the rise of less formal food concepts and demand for more relaxed wedding dining across much of the wedding mainstream. This is continuing at a pace and, although the pandemic meant a temporary retreat into the formal plated wedding meal for reasons of hygiene, the wedding food revolution continues. The long-established trend for specialist “food truck and festival style” items such as woodfired pizzas, paella on the go and churros to name but a few shows no sign of abating.

More venues have realised that these are not passing trends but couples are wanting to embrace stand-up eating, a strolling and mingling vibe and foodie fun. Originally, food-truck style concepts were often outsourced and limited in many cases to evening food. More venues, due to demand from couples, are looking at “bringing in house” some of the styled set-ups and concepts, investing in the props, accessories and equipment needed to create themed food stalls, grazing stations and the like so that it's more in their control, and revenue is added to their bottom line.

Quality

Whilst experiences vary dependent on target market, generationally couples are much more savvy about the quality and provenance of their food now and a desire for a more informal style does not necessarily need to go hand in hand with an expectation for a reduction in quality – quite the opposite. Many couples want high-quality but purely informal food that lets the ingredients speak for themselves. Venues and caterers who inspire with enticing, colourful presentation as well as substance are doing well and are able to charge comparable, if not increased, pricing for some of these offerings which can attract a premium price tag.

Service/staffing

It's become more widely accepted that couples like the style, choice and variety of the informal dining and festival food but there is still a need for full wedding day service. There can be a gap in service from the provider of a woodfired pizza company more used to a festival and public event experience to the needs of a multi-hour wedding. Many venues (and couples) have learnt the hard way that service and staffing for the entirety of a wedding day (to oversee ceremony, drinks reception, eating and the party) runs to more than standalone food trucks can and want to operate. So bringing these services in house – or certainly getting clear on exactly who is doing what across an entire wedding experience – has been the focus for many venues in embracing new trends but ensuring a quality experience at their venue.

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