"Now and Forever"

_Growth, Impacts and Future Evolution of Wedding Tourism_

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**Abstract:** The success of wedding tourism continues to be propelled by a variety of emotional and economic factors. This paper notes recent trends in destinations and demographics, drawing on examples of both traditional and emerging wedding tourism destinations. Particular importance is placed on the financial impacts of weddings abroad and the potential of further developments in the innovative, cruise and green weddings markets, as well as in gay and lesbian tourism. Consumer motivations are examined, emphasizing the unique service delivery required for this niche market and identifying opportunities for specialized marketing and product offerings.

**Wedding Tourism**

In almost every culture, the wedding is a significant life event which calls for celebration in a deeply personal and memorable way. People, place, and preparation are the foundation of the wedding, as couples design a ceremony that tells their story. While the motivations and preferences of each couple are very different, the deep longing to celebrate love in a special and lasting way is consistent across ages and cultures.

Wedding tourism, that is, travelling internationally for the purpose of getting married or celebrating a wedding (Acorn Consulting Partnership Ltd., 2008) has become increasingly popular in recent years (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 249). Weddings have become a commodity, providing opportunities for each host destination to market itself as a place where a special life event can be commemorated in an unforgettable way (Boden, 2001).

The wedding tourism market is comprised of destination wedding couples and their guests, as well as honeymoon tourists. The main weddings abroad market segments can be divided into first time marriages, re-marriages, same-sex marriages and commitment ceremonies and renewal vows (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 252). A
large percentage of wedding tourists originate from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, France and Scandinavia. Among the most popular destinations for these tourists are Hawaii, the Caribbean, Mexico, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius, Cyprus and Italy (Poon, 2009, p. 3).

As with most tourism products, wedding tourism packages are characterized by intangibility and inseparability, implying that they require a large amount of trust on the part of the consumers (De Witt, 2006, p. 65). Such an emotional investment entails risks, and the level of service quality and delivery is of the utmost importance (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 250). In addition, due to the large amounts of planning that goes into preparing for a wedding, lead booking times for this niche market tend to be longer than for regular vacationers, up to three years ahead of the wedding itself (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 257). There are a variety of factors affecting destination choice, with aspects of nature and scenery being the most influential (Kim & Agrusa, 2005, p. 901).

**Market Growth**

Wedding tourism has increased in popularity over the past decade and is recognized as a significant market segment for destinations to target. A variety of reasons, including lower costs than domestic weddings and the decreasing cost and increasing frequency of international flights, have been factors in escalating demand (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 253). Changing norms and consumer preferences have also contributed to the growth in this sector, such as the desire for guaranteed beautiful weather, the trend to have a memorable wedding in a unique location, the appeal of the convenience offered through destination wedding packages, and the new market segments such as civil ceremonies, second and third marriages, and same-sex marriages (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 253). The high divorce rate, between forty to fifty percent in the United States, has also been identified as a factor that will continue to stimulate demand for destination weddings (Adler & Chienm, 2004, p. 118). This growing market appears promising, and was determined to be one of the few sectors of
the tourism industry that continued to thrive during the 2009 recession (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 252).

Although honeymoon travel has been common for decades, destination wedding tourism is a niche market that has been emerging only in recent years. As a result, aggregate global statistics are hard to verify. Information has been gathered mainly on an individual destination basis, but these figures still reflect the significant impact of wedding tourism to these areas. In the United States, trade sources estimate the wedding market at sixteen billion dollars per year, reporting that the number of destination weddings had increased by 200 percent in the last decade (Travel Agent University). As of 2007, the United States honeymoon industry was estimated to be at $13.7 billion (Poon, 2009, p. 3), making considerable contributions to tourism revenues, with average honeymoons lasting seven to nine days and bride and groom spending three times more than they would on a regular vacation (Travel Agent University). The number of guests at destination weddings has also been increasing, as it was reported to be an average of twenty to forty people several years ago, and, as of 2004, was at approximately sixty to ninety guests (Adler & Chienm, 2004, p. 121).

According to Mintel (2010), a United Kingdom based provider of market research, one in five UK weddings takes place abroad; between 2005 and 2010, the number of weddings abroad increased by 27 percent. The desire to honeymoon abroad has also been growing, as consumer preference research revealed that the percentage of consumers wanting to honeymoon abroad has risen from 57 percent to 70 percent in the period from 2008 to 2010 (Mintel, 2010).

Statistics New Zealand’s report on wedding tourism (2010) revealed the tremendous growth in the niche market, stating that the number of couples traveling to the nation to marry increased from eight hundred per year in the eighties (three percent of couples marrying in the country) to approximately two thousand per year (eight to nine percent of marriages) during the period from 2001 to 2009.
The Cook Islands, also a popular wedding tourism destination, have seen similar growth in the market over the past years. Wedding packages were first offered in this destination in the 1980s, but the mid 1990s were when the product became popular (Jamieson, 2004, p. 157). In 1995, there were a reported 282 tourists marrying there, in 1998, there were 366 and by 2000, there were more than double that number, with 1142 tourists choosing to marry in the Cook Islands (Office of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 2001). Statistics for the Cayman Islands reveal a similar pattern of growth in wedding tourism. In 2004, 658 destination weddings occurred in the Cayman Islands and in 2006, there were 775 weddings (Tourism Company, 2009).

Studies of Japanese consumers also highlight the increasing wedding tourism market segment. According to Watanabe Wedding Company, an industry research provider, an average of 40,000 Japanese couples have destination weddings each year (Ma, 2011, p. 14). Furthermore, approximately 750,000 Japanese couples are married each year, with sixty to eighty percent of these couples choosing to travel overseas for their honeymoon (Ma, 2011, p. 15).

Rapid growth rates of wedding tourism impact destinations within Asia, as well. In India, for example, this niche market was increasing by almost one hundred percent annually, as of 2011 (Kaul & Khanna, 2011, p. 125).

The growing numbers of wedding tourists in these destinations confirms the importance of this emerging market segment worldwide. From 2002 to 2007, overall growth in this market was estimated to be approximately ten percent annually, with an expectation for even higher growth rates in the period to follow (Poon, 2009, p. 3).

**Breadth of Impact**

Trade sources report that the global market size for wedding tourism is between three and six million trips annually (Poon, 2009, p. 3). With the growth in the weddings abroad sector, and the prediction of continued growth due to high divorce rates and
consumer preferences for lower costs and/or innovation, the impact on the tourism industry is considerable. The weddings abroad market not only contributes to the wedding specialists who organize the event, but also has a large impact on the transportation, accommodation, and food sectors (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 251). While the financial impacts of a domestic wedding event are experienced for only a day or two, the contribution of destination weddings is prolonged through an extended stay. According to Poon (2009), UK residents traveling abroad for weddings spend an average of $12,000 on destination weddings and $6000 on honeymoons. Mintel (2010) estimated the following percentages of the wedding budget that are allocated to each element of the destination wedding, lasting an average of ten days. Based on research of UK couples who marry abroad, an average of 50 percent (£3250) of the average £6500 budget was spent on accommodations and meals, 25 percent (£1650) on flights, transfers and renting cars and the remaining 25 percent on wedding packages and extras.

The impacts of wedding tourism are destination-specific, as not all destinations have the resources and attractive features to profit from this growing market. Traditionally, warm destinations promising beaches and sunshine have been a desirable choice for destination weddings and honeymoons. Locations such as the Caribbean, Mexico, Mauritius, Cyprus, Italy and the Greek Islands have been very popular due to their combinations of climate and nature (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 254). Not only is climate a factor in making these attractive wedding tourism destinations, but also the legal requirements that facilitate the process of obtaining marriage licenses and that minimize pre-wedding residence requirements (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 254). Several other popular vacation destinations, on the other hand, miss opportunities to cater to the weddings market because, though they are attractive settings, the rules and regulations are a deterrent. For example, Spain and France have very strict residential, medical and administration requirements that add complication to planning a destination wedding (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 254).

The financial impacts of wedding tourism are strong, particularly since consumers tend to be more concerned with quality than price (Kim & Agrusa, 2005, p. 901).
highlight the potential financial contribution of wedding tourism, data was gathered from the Western Cape of South Africa, where there are typically 4000 destination weddings over the summer months. With guests spending an average of between R850 (139 USD) and R1000 (164 USD) per day during their stay, and every couple inviting between 30 to 50 guests, the revenues generated per wedding may total as much as between R600,000 (98,360 USD) and R 1 million (163,934 USD). This constitutes a significant contribution to the economy. Furthermore, wedding tourism creates jobs: based on the calculation that every twelve to fifteen tourists create one job in a destination, wedding tourism specifically in Western Cape may be responsible for creating between 6000 and 10,000 jobs (De Witt, 2006, p. 64). Although specific data have only been collected for a select few destinations, the impact of increasing tourism revenues and stimulating employment is widely experienced by those destinations that cater to the wedding tourism market (De Witt, 2006, p. 64).

As mentioned above, wedding tourists tend to be a higher spending target market than typical vacationers, because they want to enjoy a unique and memorable experience to the fullest extent available (Kim & Agrusa, 2005, p. 901). According to the Travel Industry Association of America, couples are willing to spend an average of $1402 on their honeymoon, while their threshold is only $421 on a regular trip. There are some couples who are even more lavish when it comes to their honeymoon, as one third of American wedding tourists are willing to spend over $2500 on their honeymoon (Poon, 2009, p. 3). Other reported figures indicate that American couples who honeymoon in the Caribbean spend five times more than the typical American tourist (The Tourism Company, 2009). Industry research provider Watanabe has conducted studies of Japanese wedding tourists, which also confirm that this segment is more willing to spend on their honeymoon trips than other travelers (Ma, 2011, p. 15).

**Future Evolution**

The wedding tourism industry is evolving, as demand grows and consumer preferences change. Though a niche market itself, the sector has its own sub niche
markets, creating opportunity for even more specialization among wedding tourism destinations. Growing segments to target include the innovative weddings market, cruise weddings, the green weddings market, and gay and lesbian wedding tourism.

Trends within wedding tourism towards more innovative locations have opened up more opportunities for destinations. Couples are now seeking a celebration that is more extraordinary than the typical beach wedding (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 252). For example, there have been weddings on Table Top Mountain, on top of the Empire State Building, and even underwater. There has also been an increasing desire for ‘White Weddings’ in cold, snowy locations such as Iceland, Austria and Lapland (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 255). This trend creates potential for destinations to recognize their unique selling feature and to market it to innovative wedding tourists, who have a high willingness to pay. Innovation in wedding tourism further opens the market, creating a place for destinations of varying climates and natural landscapes to profit from this market segment.

The weddings market is also becoming increasingly important to the cruise sector. Not only are cruises a popular choice for honeymooners, but on-ship weddings have also been increasing in number, especially among older couples and those who are not marrying for the first time (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 255). Mintel Group reports the number of cruise weddings hosted annually by the top cruise lines, with Carnival hosting 2400 weddings, Royal Caribbean hosting 800 and Norwegian Cruise Lines hosting 300 (Amster, 2012). The convenience of the packaged cruise wedding is an appealing factor, as well as the wide variety of cruise route choices.

The green weddings market has also been identified as a segment that will grow over the next years, in response the trend towards sustainable living. The green wedding business has been estimated at $4.7 billion in the United States (Conroy, Wolfgramm, & Coleman, 2012). Although the focus of some of the more innovative destination weddings is extravagance, eco weddings are also a popular choice, not only for the cost savings, but also because they can have less negative impacts on the environment than
traditional weddings. Destination wedding venues have the opportunity to be creative in the ways that they satisfy consumer preferences, by offering specialized products and services that are tailored to the eco-friendly theme. For example, offerings such as biodegradable confetti, ethical and conflict free diamond rings and locally harvested flowers are ways of tailoring the wedding package to the green weddings segment (Conroy, Wolfram, & Coleman, 2012).

The gay and lesbian tourism segment is also expected to contribute to the growing wedding tourism market, especially since these tourists typically have above average disposable income (Poon, 2009, p. 3). The UNWTO Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) report (2012) highlights the increase in preference for destination weddings among same-sex couples, particularly in Europe, Latin America and the United States. The report predicts that, as demand from this market segment increases, more destinations will choose to legalize same-sex marriages in order to profit from this opportunity. Certain individual destinations have conducted studies to determine the impact of legalizing same-sex marriages. For example, a study in New Mexico, based on tourism research and Census data, estimated that the initial three years following the legalization of same gender marriages would generate approximately $1.35 million in tax revenues (Badgett, Bradley Sears, Homer, Curtis & Kukura, 2006).

Conclusion

Wedding tourism is a growing niche market that has impacted destinations on all continents. With demand predicted to continue increasing, this sector will grow in its importance to the tourism industry. New opportunities for host destinations and service providers are emerging, as the industry evolves and new niches form. Wedding tourism is an area that should be further researched, with more data being gathered on a global level. To date, its contributions to the tourism industry have been significant, and the market has large potential.
References


