



Travelers are In the Mood for Love

By Paloma Villaverde de Rico [Robert Curley contributed to this report]

Weddings[★]
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With many COVID restrictions lifted, pent-up demand is real, and travelers are hungry to explore the world once again. This also holds true for lovebirds who are eager to walk down the aisle, jet off on their honeymoon, or perhaps rekindle romance or celebrate a milestone in a foreign location. They are excited to embrace the world and do it as a couple. Yes, these past two-and-a-half years haven't been easy, but it looks like things are finally on the upswing and romance travel is at the top of the must-do list as many couples held off wedding and honeymoon plans. And as you plan your clients' romance vacations, what are couples asking for now that they didn't even think of pre-pandemic; what has shifted in terms of their wants and needs when planning their vacations; what are you doing differently when booking your romance clients' dream vacations; what does a return to travel look like in 2022 & beyond?

For this Romance Travel Trends Report—a complement to the *Romance Travel Trends Survey* conducted on recommend.com, as well as the *Woo Your Clients with Expertise on Weddings & Honeymoons Webinar*—we reached out to experts in the romance travel segment to gain insight into what romance travel looks like now and into 2023. This report also contains survey data, where, we found out, the Caribbean, all-inclusives and beach getaways are still trending when it comes to romance-laced vacations.

But is inflation raining on your clients' dream destination wedding or romance getaway? No, says Lauren Doyle, president and senior travel advisor with **The Travel Mechanic**, "I think people know that things are going to cost more, and they are planning for it."

What's Trending



"Wedding inquiries have skyrocketed," says Loreto Lazo, director of romance for the Americas for **Iberostar Hotels & Resorts**, "as more couples consider the advantage of a destination wedding. Those who had to reschedule a traditional wedding are opting now for destination events instead."

This is where you can make a sizeable commission because although destination wedding

group sizes vary, Doyle says, "couples who haven't gathered with family in years are inviting everyone and even destination wedding guests are opting to stay longer or make an entire vacation out of it."

In fact, says Frank Corzo, v.p. for U.S. field sales at **Palace Reports**, "Current booking trends indicate that we are receiving larger wedding parties this year than before, in terms of

the number of rooms booked," with Abraham Issa, president of sales and marketing for **Couples Resorts**, noting that larger groups is the "number-one trend that we are seeing since 2021. Groups have gone from an average of approximately 20 to 25 guests to now 30 to 40 guests."

But some couples, says Lazo, have actually opted for a more intimate affair. There is a push, she says, for "elopement options and micro-weddings for couples who just want to get married without all the fanfare. It makes it easier without the travel complications. With that, they've taken budgets previously used for lavish events and are pouring them into more intimate experiential events for less people."

Nevis Tourism Authority's CEO Devon Liburd concurs, pointing to the fact that couples are changing their wedding plans as many guests have different needs and expectations. "This also means," he says, "that many destination weddings are more intimate and less conventional; couples are incorporating more of the local aspect in their nuptials."

In fact, when it comes to what's trending when it comes to the big day—extravagant, a micro-wedding or anything ➤

"For honeymoons, many people are opting for island-hopping in Greece; Scotland has been a popular request and even Iceland. I think people are combining bucket list and honeymoon since so much time has been missed over the past three years."

— *Lauren Doyle, President & Senior Travel Advisor, The Travel Mechanic*



ANDREAS RÖNNINGEN ON UNSPASH

in-between—Doyle says, “We see unique experiences over cookie-cutter. They are either looking for a specific experience (party with friends), unique experience (like a reception on a boat), or something else memorable to them.” And, notes Lazo, a big trend is more resort buyouts—either whole properties or entire sections of the resort. Additionally, “with the experiential opportunities booming, the need for a preview trip for the couple is heightened so they can fully customize the event and make it unique to them.”

When it comes to honeymoons, or romantic getaways in general, a big trend is locally immersive exploration. Even couples who are opting for an all-inclusive holiday, says Doyle, want to make sure “they explore the destination in some way.”

“This will continue to be a big trend,” says Liburd, “since many couples are opting for intimate settings that allow them to connect with each other and the destination they are visiting. They are also loving nature experiences.” In Caribbean destinations, he says, there’s room to roam as the region is

filled with secluded beaches, and a vast opportunity for adventure under the sun.

Lazo notes that for honeymooners this is especially true: “We are seeing more adventure-seekers and couples interested in exploring the destination. We continue to see spending on spa, romantic extras and upgraded accommodations.”

Adds John Diorio, v.p. of North American sales for **Virgin Voyages**: “I’ve been hearing from our First Mates [Virgin Voyages’ travel advisor partners] that couples are continuing to prioritize authentic experiences that give an unfiltered view into a destination or activities that prioritize wellness. They want to enjoy their vacation without feeling like it sets them back from their goals and to experience new cultures in a sustainable way.” He also notes that the cruise brand has “seen an uptick in couples looking to maximize those vacation days they weren’t able to use over the past two years to book a week or more in western Europe or a long weekend escape close to home.”

He notes that what makes cruising ideal for lovebirds is that it’s stress- and hassle-free. “For couples, cruising is an affordable way to see multiple countries in a

short period of time. Rather than having to fly, unpack, explore, re-pack, and move onto the next destination, couples can wake up in a new location every morning. As most cruises also prioritize entertainment and onboard programming, there are activities that appeal to all sorts of couples, whether their interests lie in food, photography, wellbeing, relaxation, etc. Couples can be as removed or involved as they’d like and really tailor the experience to how they’re feeling on that particular day.”

“ Many couples and romance travelers have had their plans constantly changed over the past two years and for that reason are now more flexible and open to different romance travel options. They are no longer looking for the perfect wedding or perfect honeymoon, rather they are more willing to engage in new experiences and even to splurge more for something special.”

*-- Devon Liburd, CEO,
Nevis Tourism Authority*

Survey Says...



We wanted to hear from you—what is on your clients' bucket lists; what destinations are they booking; what's their ideal wedding and honeymoon setting. You gave us the 4-1-1 and here's what the survey says:

As we start leaving the pandemic behind us, almost **70 percent** of survey-takers say they are **optimistic about travel's big comeback**, with clients jumping back in the saddle, so to speak, and booking everything from destination weddings to couples' getaways.

More than **80 percent** of those who participated in the survey point to **beaches** (think Saint Lucia with a view of the Pitons) as the most popular type of vacation they are currently booking

for romance clients, with all-inclusives in the Caribbean being especially popular. In fact, 90 percent of respondents said that **all-inclusives** are the number-one choice among their clients when deciding on a **destination wedding venue**.

Half of respondents forecast sales for romance travel to be similar to pre-COVID numbers, but if there's one concern it's that travelers still feel that there are too many hoops to traveling internationally [note, this survey was conducted prior to the Biden administration ending COVID-19 testing requirement for air travelers].

The experts we spoke with seem to signal a trend to larger wedding groups, but the

majority of survey respondents (76 percent) say **groups are trending smaller**.

For destination wedding bookings as well as a "just-because" couples' getaways, the average number of nights is 4-6, says 60 percent of survey respondents, with honeymooners clocking in at 7-13 nights, say more than half of those surveyed.

And, say half of the survey respondents, **couples are ready for a cruise vacation**, with most opting to **sail in the Caribbean or Europe**.

“The average length of stay for honeymoons is still approximately seven days but some couples will choose a slightly longer stay in order to split their stay between resorts for the wedding and honeymoon.”

— Loreto Lazo, Director of Romance for the Americas, Iberostar Hotels & Resorts

TOP 4 ESSENTIAL MUST-HAVES FOR A PERFECT ROMANCE VACATION:

(According to our survey-takers)

- Top-notch service
- Seclusion
- Room to roam
- Villa accommodations



Book It



Here are a few booking options for romance travel:

♥ **Iberostar Hotels & Resorts** in Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica has unveiled the *Ever Green Weddings* program—carbon-neutral events that honor the natural environment.

“Achieving the *Ever Green* Wedding concept with such elegant and glamorous decor was something we are very proud of to have accomplished,” says Lazo. “This program proves sustainability is stunning by creating an elevated look and feel with minimal impact on the environment.” The hotel group now offers an a la carte menu of wedding options and is offering a *Wedding Week* program that helps your clients celebrate beyond the big day with custom itineraries that can include cocktail parties, off-property excursions and beach days, among other offerings.

♥ In **Nevis**, couples can choose from picturesque churches, historic plantations, sandy beaches or tropical gardens for the nuptials, says Liburd. For couples truly looking to immerse themselves in tranquility and the local culture, Liburd points to

Montpelier Plantation & Beach, a 300-year-old sugar plantation converted into a hotel situated 750 ft. above the Caribbean Sea in the foothills of Nevis Peak, and surrounded by 60 acres of lush tropical gardens. For a culinary feast, he recommends **On the Dune at the Four Seasons**, “a romantic, upscale, and relaxing beachside restaurant.”

♥ Over at **Virgin Voyages**, it’s a kids-free experience. The cruise line is ideal for couples, says Diorio, because “we offer an exclusively-adult experience,” with complimentary group fitness classes, as well as cabins with balconies and playful mood lighting, and the option for a romantic couples’ massage at **Redemption Spa**.

♥ For that adults-only recommendation you can also look to **Palace Resorts**, whose **Le Blanc Spa Resorts** in **Cancun** and **Los Cabos** cater to the 18+ crowd and, as Corzo notes, are ultra-luxe spa resorts. **Moon Palace Jamaica**, meanwhile, is ideal for weddings with popular venues such as the North Gazebo, while **Moon Palace The Grand** in Cancun offers the brand-new **Lily Garden**.

♥ A standout for a wedding is the private island at **Couples Tower Isle**, which can be reserved for wedding groups of up to 40. And that same resort offers the *Spa Villas*, ideal for honeymooners, says Issa, “as guests of those benefit from unlimited spa treatments throughout their stay, as well as expansive villas with private pools.”

“Imagine a couple wanting to spend a romantic dinner together on a ship only to be sat at a table of 10 people every night. At Virgin Voyages, there’s no specific dining arrangements or awkward encounters—rather dinner for two at the restaurant of your choice, or couples can opt to sit at the bar (all eateries have their own bar).”

-- John Diorio, Vice President of North American Sales, Virgin Voyages

SAINT LUCIA

From its majestic, verdant mountain peaks to its serene, sandy coves, Saint Lucia seems naturally inclined to inspire romance. What better place to declare your love than on its singularly pristine shores, fronted by a brilliant blue horizon? With a landscape unmatched in beauty, accommodations built for passion and attractions ranging from the adventurous to the tranquil, there's a legendary romantic getaway here for every couple, from honeymooners to lifelong loves—and enough to keep them returning for years to come.

Saint Lucia owes much of its romantic appeal to its terrain: exotic, striking and uniquely picturesque. Even travelers familiar with the Caribbean are awed by the scenery of its Piton Mountains, rising to a height of 2,500 ft. and plummeting directly down into the Caribbean Sea. Couples can take in these spectacular attractions from a variety of venues throughout the island.

With romance literally surrounding them, it's no wonder that Saint Lucia's resorts tend to emphasize the romantic aspects of their accommodations and amenities. The island is home to some of the best honeymoon resorts in the world.

What's a romantic getaway without a little decadence and pampering? There's no better destination in the Caribbean for state-of-the-art, unique and local treatments. And for anyone who believes that the stomach is the quickest way to a man's heart (or a woman's heart, for that matter), Saint Lucia is a foodie paradise. From gourmet dining at the island's resorts and restaurants to local cuisine featuring fresh ingredients grown or caught locally, the cuisine is truly unforgettable, reflecting the island's French, British and African heritage. Weekly parties like the legendary Gros Islet Jump Up give couples the chance to fill up on the sublime daily catch and mingle with the locals.

For more, visit stlucia.org

About Saint Lucia

The **Saint Lucia Romance Expert Program** gives you the opportunity to sell the most romantic and one-of-a-kind vacations to your clients. Learn and earn today!

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IBEROSTAR HOTELS & RESORTS

Your clients have been dreaming of their destination wedding day and at Iberostar Hotels & Resorts we make it a reality with **Weddings by Iberostar** as imagined by you. We believe that each wedding is unique, which is why we have removed the wedding package approach to allow couples unlimited inspiration. We guarantee that couples and their guests will live an unforgettable experience with the highest standards of luxury, quality and commitment to caring for the environment. Our **Honeymoon and Proposal Collections** make all the details of those special moments so extraordinary. More than 20 hotels located in Mexico, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, with impressive locations beyond the beach, make choosing where to get married all the more difficult, because each property has its own personality.

As part of this new **Weddings Reimagined** program, couples also can explore:

- ♥ *Ever Green Weddings:* Proving green weddings can still be glam and why Iberostar is the leader in responsible events!
- ♥ *Weddings Unpackaged:* Peeling back the packages to ask couples what they want instead of telling them what we have.
- ♥ *Lookbook Inspirations:* Couples can let their imaginations run wild while they explore a few of our favorite looks we have carefully created. No two weddings are alike and when it comes to what we can do, the sky's the limit.
- ♥ *First Look:* To assist clients in making their dream wedding come true, we offer the First Look experience, where couples receive perks and benefits while getting a glimpse of their dream wedding.

About Iberostar Hotels & Resorts

Iberostar Hotels & Resorts is a hotel chain with more than 100 four- and five-star luxury hotels in 16 countries. The company has positioned itself as an international benchmark in responsible tourism by promoting a more sustainable business model focused on the care for people and the environment. The Wave of Change movement reflects Iberostar's explicit commitment to the oceans, and the company's effort to share it with all of society.

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