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Fort Lauderdale Targets Destination Weddings

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When April Willard began planning her wedding to Keith Hermann, logistics proved a challenge. Her family lives in Central Florida, his in suburban New York. The couple used to live in Manhattan, where most of their friends are, but now live in California. Where, Willard wondered, should they tie the knot?

On a recent Saturday, at 9:30 a.m., the 31-year-old nurse said "I do" on Fort Lauderdale beach. She wore a 1950s-style leopard print dress with a red petticoat, stood atop the rooftop terrace of the **Pelican Grand Beach Resort** and shared with about 80 guests who came from around the county for the weekend.

"Having everything in one place is huge," said Willard, who made most arrangements long-distance with help from the resort's wedding coordinator. "You want to spend time with everyone."

Greater Fort Lauderdale is boosting promotions to brides-to-be like Willard, hoping that a larger wedding market can offset weakness in business travel and provide a cushion for hotels even in a slow economy.

Key to the push is the debut of upscale hotels on the beach including the W, Ritz-Carlton and Westin, which offer ballrooms and party facilities and provide a larger cluster of sites for the weddings than in the past.

Easy access, low-fare airlines, beaches and a wide range of hotel offerings and restaurants make Fort Lauderdale more attractive for wedding groups, said Susan Moynihan, editor of Destination Weddings and Honeymoons magazine.

It also helps that the nearby cruise port is near, so couples can whisk right off for their honeymoons.

Fort Lauderdale is targeting a market worth at least \$8 billion a year, according to Destination Weddings and weddingreport.com. They estimate 18 percent of the 2.2 million U.S. weddings yearly are destination-based, with outlays averaging more than \$20,000 each.

Individual hotels in Fort Lauderdale have targeted destination weddings for years, but Broward now markets its area offerings as a group. A weddings section on its sunny.org website offers information on hotels, photographers, chapels and such unique venues as a water taxi. And marketers for meetings and conventions now target weddings as well as trade shows, bureau executives said.

Willard didn't need much marketing to make her decision. She figured a wedding in her former hometown of New York would be expensive and hard to make for her family from Sebring, including six brothers and sisters. She picked Fort Lauderdale because she knew flights and hotels in South Florida would be easy and affordable for her New York pals.

But the **Pelican Grand Beach Resort** was a fluke choice. Willard was driving around Fort Lauderdale, scouting locations, when she happened upon the hotel on the sand. The resort's wedding coordinator, Christy Hechler, sealed the deal, with her experience in handling all the logistics and details, Willard said.

The slow economy both helps and hurts destination weddings, experts say, many couples are spending less to economize.

At the **Pelican Grand**, the average wedding party now spends \$18,000 to \$25,000, down from \$26,000 to \$35,000 before the recession. Couples are inviting fewer guests, picking fewer bridesmaids or choosing casual buffets instead of sit-down dinners among options to trim costs, said Hechler.

"Instead of putting 100 flowers in one vase, they'll put 100 flowers in 25 vases to fill the room with flowers in every nook and cranny," said Noel Brown, owner of Medallion Occasion Boutique in Fort Lauderdale, a wedding specialist that provides flowers, tents and other supplies.

Yet the tight economy helps Florida compete. Florida unseated Hawaii as the top spot for U.S. destination weddings, because Hawaii takes more time and money to reach, said Destination Weddings magazine editor Moynihan. And U.S. weddings are gaining, as international airfares have risen, the dollar weakened and. even travel to Mexico or **Jamaica** requires **U.S.** passports, specialists say.

Heather and David Morris selected Florida for their Memorial Day weekend wedding this year, seeking a change from wedding after wedding near their Chicago area. She'd grown up spending summers with family in Naples, always dreamed of a beach wedding and chose Fort Lauderdale because of two airports close, prices lower than South Beach, downtown shops and restaurants nearby and a good deal at the newly renovated Sheraton.

Close to 100 people attended the wedding, instead of 250-plus that likely would have come to Chicago. That meant the couple enjoyed a "more intimate experience" with guests, Heather Morris said. They spent several days with them at breakfasts, lunches, dinners, swimming, boating and partying -- and kept the fun going, as two dozen pals joined them on a cruise from Port Everglades.

"You'd think it would be so much harder to do a wedding out of state, but it was actually easier," thanks to the help from the hotel's wedding coordinators, Morris said. "We turned it into a two-week vacation."

Weddings like Morris' also can mean more tourism to Broward later. Already, some friends who attended the Morris wedding have booked a weekend back at the Sheraton to enjoy Fort Lauderdale again. "And for our anniversary," added Heather Morris, "we'll have a reason to go back and celebrate."