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wedding planner 101

Which type of pro is right for you? Read on to find out.

BY LISA MILBRAND

Destination weddings have their own challenges, and most brides can benefit from having a planner's help. Check out our tutorial to figure out whether a personal, resort or online planner is best for your personality and wedding vision. Then turn to page 30 for our first-ever A-List of destination-wedding planners — 30 on-the-ground pros who have passed *DWH*'s exacting standards and are ready and waiting to plan your big day.

PERSONAL PLANNER

THE SCOOP When you think *wedding coordinator*, a personal planner is probably what pops to mind, à la J. Lo in *The Wedding Planner*. This pro's job is to take your budget and your wedding ideas, then hire the right people and services to build your dream event. Most personal planners manage the event from start to finish, including decor and cuisine for surrounding events, travel arrangements and welcome

gifts; some will even go dress shopping with you. But it's also possible to hire one for more limited services, such as a brainstorming consultation to get you started or day-of coordination at the wedding itself. You can hire a consultant based in your hometown, at your destination of choice or at any point in between.

THE UPSIDE A full-service planner can make planning a breeze — tell her what you want, and she'll make it happen. "A

wedding planner's first priority is protecting the couple's best interests," says event producer Beth Helmstetter. "That includes watching out for unnecessary expenses and ensuring everything that was contracted from all vendors, not just the resort, is held up."

THE DOWNSIDE Many personal planners are full-service, which may be frustrating if you're a DIY kind of bride. "If you really enjoy being hands-on, a full-service

planner may not be the best investment," Helmstetter says. "Consider hiring partial planning services for elements outside your comfort zone, or even just a day-of coordinator if you are research savvy." While most planners can create an event anywhere, it pays to seek out a consultant

who has experience with destination weddings, ideally in your chosen location. This is especially key for an international wedding, where you need someone familiar with customs laws, work permits and anything else that may be an issue.

COST As expected, all this fabulous help

doesn't come for free. Most planners charge a percentage of the overall budget — \$3,000 to \$20,000 is the norm — which can eat up a significant portion of your wedding funds.

TYPE OF BRIDE If you want an elaborate event or don't want the hassle of dealing with multiple vendors, you can benefit from the guidance of a personal planner. Customize your needs to whatever degree your budget allows.

Some popular resorts, especially larger ones, have event teams that can manage every detail, no matter how elaborate.

RESORT PLANNER

THE SCOOP Many resorts have dedicated on-staff planners who help couples plan their big events and work with them onsite to ensure that everything runs smoothly on the wedding day.

THE UPSIDE Resorts generally offer a planner's services for free if you're holding your event there, making this the cheapest way to get professional help. Since these pros have likely orchestrated dozens of weddings at your hotel, they'll have plenty of advice about what works and what doesn't. "These planners know the properties and all the ins and outs — they're really close to it," says Korri McFann of Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings.

THE DOWNSIDE The level of help offered varies from property to property. "Make sure they'll deliver the level of service you need," suggests McFann. Some catering managers are limited to site-related issues and can provide only a select list of vendors. "You still have to call the florist or the photographer yourself," McFann says. Other resorts, especially larger ones, have specialized event teams that can manage every detail, no matter how elaborate.



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COST Resort planners are usually complimentary with a minimum amount spent or the booking of a package. If you stick to the package as offered, you shouldn't have any problems; if you want to vary some items or bring in your own vendors for some tasks, it will cost extra. These planners are employed by the resort, not you, so chances are they'll side with the resort if there's a conflict of interest. Protect yourself by looking over each package carefully and working out any potential conflicts well in advance.

TYPE OF BRIDE Any bride could benefit from a little help, especially if it's complimentary. If you're planning a simple, choose-a-package wedding or tying the knot at a larger resort that offers dedicated planning, the gratis guidance may be all you really need.

ONLINE PLANNER

THE SCOOP Consider this a 21st-century variation on the personal planner. You hire this person to manage all of your wedding tasks remotely, from booking your travel to hiring your vendors. You may not meet your consultant in person until the wedding, if at all — as your conversations are handled over email and phone.

THE UPSIDE These planners can work out all of the details, and you don't have to worry about making time for regular meetings or phone calls. "Often, brides come to us and say, 'I'm extremely busy. Here's a general idea of what I'd like to do and my budget. Please help me put this together,'" says Tara Soloway of Luxe Destination Weddings. "A virtual planner can take care of the details for them, accomplishing everything on the planning end via emails and phone calls."

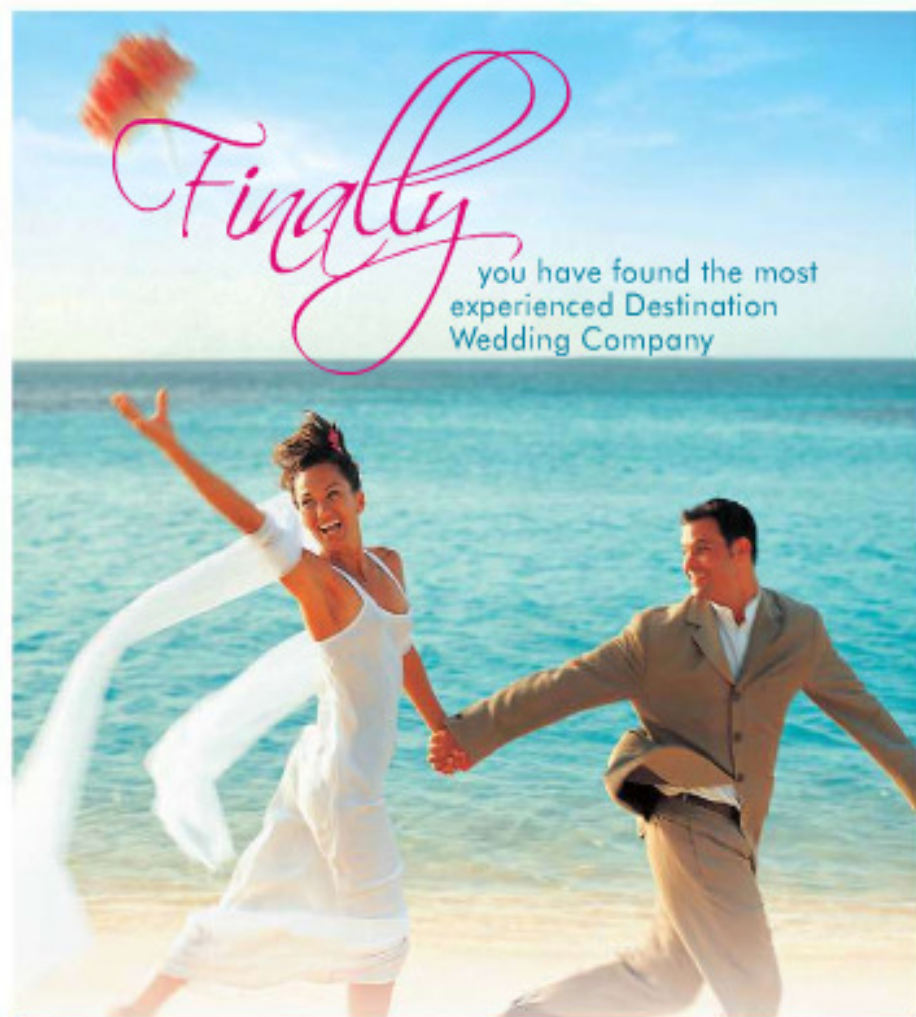
THE DOWNSIDE If you do want human contact, a few Skype conferences and a weekly email just won't cut it. "Brides who need constant in-person, visual meetings would not benefit from a virtual planner," Soloway says. Also, you'll need to find out if your virtual planner offers a real-life representative to be with you on your wedding day and ensure everything goes as planned, which may or may not be part of the package.

COST No matter how involved you want your planner to be, prepare to pay for their services, which will affect your bottom line. Expect rates to hit around \$2,000.

TYPE OF BRIDE "Busy brides suit the virtual relationship best," says Soloway. "Many of our clients are professionals who work

long hours, making in-person meetings next to impossible." It's also good for on-the-go types who don't like talking on the phone, as so many details can be managed via email. ■

FOR MORE INFO, SEE THE 411 ON PAGE 116.



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DESTINATIONWEDDINGS.COM

introducing our first-ever A-LIST PLANNERS!

It's hard enough to plan a traditional wedding, but destination do's take even more know-how: A destination planner has to handle unique challenges, from sourcing the right shade of roses in a remote locale to dealing with customs issues to navigating the oft-dizzying requirements for a legally binding union away from home.

We've scoured the globe to find 30 top destination-wedding planners. Our pros combine decades of experience with true passion for their work, evidenced by the gorgeous weddings they've done all over the planet and the scores of gushing recommendation letters we've received from their past clients. If you're searching for a trustworthy planner to make your wedding dream come true, look no further!

Meet the *DWH* A-List

LARISSA BANTING

WEDDINGS COSTA RICA,
COSTA RICA

SPECIALTY Creating weddings that are reflections of the couple and what is unique to Costa Rica. "I love planning destination weddings because I was a destination bride myself. Marrying away allows the couple to really enjoy the wedding experience." weddingscostarica.com

DAPHNE BARBETTO

WED AFFAIR, PUERTO RICO

SPECIALTY Sunset beach weddings. "I enjoy the planning process and want to get that wow factor from the guests. Weddings are like a play, with characters, choreography, lighting, decoration and, of course, a story. Our job is to ensure that it all flows seamlessly!" wedaffair.com

NIKKI BEGG

BERMUDA BRIDE, BERMUDA

SPECIALTY Combining organizational skills, attention to detail and knowledge of Bermuda to create a personalized, stress-free wedding. "I love recognizing what's important to the bride and delivering. It's humbling and hugely satisfying to create a wedding that exceeds the couple's expectations." bermudabride.com

JO-ANNE BROWN

CELEBRATIONS, CAYMAN ISLANDS

SPECIALTY Designing one-of-a-kind couture weddings with Caribbean flair. "I have a reputation for crying at all my weddings! It's truly a blessing to be the person to make people's dreams become a reality. I can't think of a more rewarding profession than this!" celebrationsitd.com

QUENTIN CARMICHAEL III

DESTINATIONWEDDINGS.COM

SPECIALTY Exotic destination weddings in the Caribbean, Mexico, Hawaii and Central America. "The best part about planning destination weddings is being there to get clients out of a jam — it's a great feeling ensuring that nothing gets in the way of each couple's perfect wedding." destinationweddings.com

PAULETTE DAVIS

BAHAMAS WEDDING PLANNER
NASSAU, BAHAMAS

SPECIALTY Elegant and affordable beach weddings and receptions. "I love seeing people's happiness on their wedding day. Hearing, 'It was so much more than I expected,' and, 'All my guests are saying it was the best wedding they have been to!' is worth any stress that may come with it." bahamasweddingplanner.com

JOANN GREGOLI

ELEGANT OCCASIONS
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

SPECIALTY Destination weddings in the Caribbean, Mexico and Europe. "At destination weddings, families and friends reconnect, and couples spend time with loved ones. My reward is having people together in memorable, breathtaking destinations!" elegantoccasions.com

TARA GUÉRARD

SOIRÉE BY TARA GUÉRARD
CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

SPECIALTY Full-service planning and design with Southern grace, exceptional service and handcrafted details. "Destination weddings have beautiful backdrops that inspire us to use minimal decor and indigenous flowers for a naturally stunning setting." soireebytaraquerard.com

BETH HELMSTETTER

BETH HELMSTETTER EVENTS
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

SPECIALTY Destination weddings and intimate events that tend to be both comfortable for those attending and effortless in style. "I love to create a stress-free event where the couple's family and friends catch up and form new bonds throughout the celebration." bethhelmstetter.com

ALISON HOTCHKISS

ALISON EVENTS
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

SPECIALTY Full service planning specializing in boutique destination events. "I have always loved to travel, so when I expanded my business to cover weddings from afar, I found my niche. Researching a new place and embracing new cultures inspires me." alisononevents.com



NATALIE JOHN
DREAMY WEDDINGS & TOURS
CARIBBEAN

SPECIALTY Destination weddings in 13 Caribbean destinations, including St. Lucia, St. Maarten and Jamaica. "I love listening to my clients, imagining their dreams and actually making them a reality — and then hearing from those couples that the wedding was exactly what they'd envisioned." dreamyweddings.com

TRACEY KUMER-MOORE
YOUR LAS VEGAS WEDDING
CONCIERGE, LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

SPECIALTY Creating romantic, memorable and stylish celebrations of love and life in her hometown of Las Vegas. "I love planning a very special experience for the bride and groom, their family and friends in this fabulous, unforgettable town!" lweddingconciierge.com

TIFFANY LANIER
SUNHORSE WEDDINGS
ISLA MUJERES, MEXICO

SPECIALTY Creating beautiful, intimate beach weddings. "Every wedding is so unique and special, it never gets boring. Watching the bride you've been talking to for several months finally walk down the aisle in the wedding she's been dreaming of her whole life is an amazing experience." sunhorseservices.com

LISA LIGHT
LISA LIGHT LTD.
CHATHAM,
NEW YORK

SPECIALTY Planning weddings all over the world, with teams in more than 40 countries and a large private-location library. "I have been planning destination weddings since before the term was coined and wrote the book *Destination Bride: A Complete Guide to Planning Your Wedding Anywhere in the World* in 2006. My passion is finding the perfect destination and putting together the best team possible for every wedding." destinationbride.com

KELLY MCWILLIAMS
WEDDINGS BY SOCIALITES
CAPE CORAL, FLORIDA

SPECIALTY Multi-event destination-wedding weekends in southwest Florida. "I love the quality time you get with a destination wedding. It's more than just a four-hour party — it's a couple's closest family and friends coming together and celebrating all weekend long. I also love that I have the opportunity to design multiple amazing parties." weddingsbysocialites.com

STACY MULCARE
CEREMONIES OF ST. JOHN
ST. JOHN, USVI

SPECIALTY Destination wedding planning primarily on Virgin Islands National Park beaches. "No two weddings are alike — each couple has a unique expression of their love that they rely on me to convey and arrange for them on the island." usviwedding.com

LINDA PITTELLI
EVENTFUL
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA;
VERMONT, ITALY

SPECIALTY Transforming a home, castle, villa or vineyard into a beautiful painting that exudes warmth and that no one will ever forget. "Each wedding is a new adventure, a new location with new challenges and new solutions, which is why my clients always say, 'I've never experienced anything like this before!'" eventfuldesigning.com

MICHELLE RAGO
MICHELLE RAGO LTD.
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

SPECIALTY Creating a unique vision for the wedding as it relates to the location or couple. "Personally, I love destination weddings because I'm obsessed with other cultures. Professionally, weddings are the coming together of two families and a celebration of life — rich with tradition and imbued with the families' own backgrounds and cultures." michelleragold.com

JANET RENNER
ROYAL HAWAIIAN WEDDINGS
MAUI, HAWAII

SPECIALTY Small, intimate and casually romantic weddings in Maui. "I enjoy meeting people from all over, and I love helping couples discover what they want for their wedding and then creating it for them — focusing on the joy of planning their very special day in the place they have always dreamed of." royalhawaiianweddings.com

STEPHANIE SKIBA
COZUMEL WEDDING PLANNER
COZUMEL, MEXICO

SPECIALTY Creating a tailored, unsurpassed experience, from intimate ceremonies of just a few guests to more elaborate events, in Mexico. "Cozumel offers such an incredible backdrop of beauty and romance. It's always a thrill for us to see our couples relaxed and enjoying the island — especially when it's just minutes before they walk down the aisle." cozumelweddingplanner.com



TARA SOLOWAY
LUXE DESTINATION
WEDDINGS

SPECIALTY Virtual destination wedding planning in the Caribbean and Mexico. "Having had my own destination wedding and loving the experience, I truly enjoy helping other brides and grooms achieve something equally as memorable. Also, I find that destination couples are a lot more fun to work with because they're open to thinking outside the box!" luxedestinationweddings.com

SUSAN SOUTHERLAND
JUST MARRY!

ORLANDO, FLORIDA
SPECIALTY Intimate or extravagant weddings and leading the way in making a lifetime of memories. "Whether I'm traveling with my clients to an exotic locale or planning a destination wedding for a couple coming to my hometown, the process always allows me to build a close relationship with my clients." justmarry.com, susansoutherland.com

SASHA SOUZA
SASHA SOUZA EVENTS
NAPA, CALIFORNIA

SPECIALTY Trendsetting, infusing local flavor and unexpected color into events, and beautifully blending nature with event design. "I like the smaller guest counts of destination weddings, the guests' fascination with the areas and the adventure of going someplace new." sashasouzaevents.com

SOMCHIT SRIMOON
THAILAND WEDDINGS
CHIANG MAI, THAILAND

SPECIALTY Traditional Thai Buddhist weddings, as well as Christian weddings. "I love doing destination weddings because you can make memories for people that they'll talk about lovingly for years to come. That's true for not only the couple and their families but for their guests as well." thailandweddings.com

ANN WHITE
FORTÉ WEDDINGS
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO

SPECIALTY Creating one-of-a-kind weddings with a high level of client service. "With so many unique locations, I love the challenge of finding the right spot for each bride, collecting the vendors and presenting her with the wedding of her dreams — without her ever having to lift a finger!" forteevents.com



style setters

These celeb planners are known for over-the-top events and star-studded clientele but will work with any bride who can afford them.

PRESTON BAILEY

Known for his ability to transform raw spaces into opulent, theatrical environments, this New York City event designer has written sought-after books like *Fantasy Weddings and Celebrations*. Clients include Donald Trump, Oprah Winfrey, and Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones. prestonbailey.com

MARCY BLUM

This "eventiste" blends the tenets of theater, cuisine, decor and atmosphere into every event she creates. She is the author of *Wedding Planning for Dummies* and *Wedding Kit for Dummies* and has designed events for Billy Joel, Regis Philbin, Kevin Bacon and Kyra Sedgwick, and others. marcyblum.com

COLIN COWIE

This South African arbiter of style is known for producing spectacular celebrations for clients such as John Travolta, Nicole Kidman, Jennifer Aniston and Demi Moore. He is also the author of eight best-selling books such as *Extraordinary Weddings* and *Colin Cowie Wedding Chic*. colincowie.com

DAVID TUTERA

This leading entertaining expert has translated his event-planning passion into six books, including the brand-new *Big White Book of Weddings*, as well as a WEtv prime-time show, *My Fair Wedding*. His clients include Jennifer Lopez, Matthew McConaughey, Elton John and Tommy Hilfinger. davidtutera.com

MINDY WEISS

Recognized for her creative ideas and unexpected decor, this Beverly Hills-based planner and lifestyle expert has expanded her business into a book, *The Wedding Book*, and product line. Clients include Ashlee Simpson and Pete Wentz, Eva Longoria and Tony Parker, and Heidi Klum and Seal. mindyweiss.com