

# Best places to elope in the Caribbean

By Steve Blount



There is something about the rhythmic breathing of the ocean that is primordially sensuous and intensely romantic. That's why so many flee the urban north to get married in the Caribbean. Some are planners, carefully plotting the flowers and foods for guests, while others give in to impulse and elope — finding themselves legally attached and deliriously stranded on a deserted beach less than 24 hours later.

Erica Hebert, a wedding planner with Weddings The Island Way in St. Thomas, USVI, has been helping folks get hitched there for nearly 20 years. She cites the cost of an average continental wedding — \$26,000 — as one of the reasons she's seen a steady increase in the number of couples opting for a tropical ceremony. "How many of the guests are people you really want to celebrate with and how many are people your parents will insist you invite?" Hebert says. "A lot of couples are waiting to get married, so they're older and have a more defined idea of what they want, and many want more adventure than just having another church wedding in town." For those with social obligations and friends who can't make the trip to the islands with them, Hebert has a simple solution — have a reception and party when you get back from the honeymoon.

If you're considering this route, here are 10 places that should be on your itinerary.

The legal requirements to get married vary greatly from island to island. There are myriad islands to choose from but some make it easier for visitors to marry than others; the Dominican Republic and Curacao are wonderful, but they require U.S. couples to clear significant hurdles before they leave home. One way around common barriers — such as having your birth certificate and divorce papers translated into another language — is to marry in one of the U.S. Caribbean territories. Other countries, including the Bahamas and Mexico, make it simple for Americans to marry. Wherever you decide to say "I do," make sure you understand and can comply with all of the requirements before you are Caribbean-bound. Connecting with a local wedding planner, even if only to have them coordinate the legal paperwork, is a good idea. Your hotel will know how you can reach one.

## Tobago

Tobago is almost as far south as you can go in the Caribbean; only its sister island Trinidad is closer to South America. Although English-speaking, it's also one of the most diverse islands, celebrating marriages for not only Christians and Jews, but also Muslims and Hindus, courtesy of its heritage of immigrants from South Asia. Neighboring Trinidad is highly industrialized – calypso and the steel drum, made from oil drums discarded by the island's numerous refineries, were born there — while Tobago bills itself as "the natural choice," a reference to its rolling hills covered in tropical foliage. There's an annual mid-summer festival devoted to marriage, the Tobago Ole Time Wedding Festival. Men dressed in swallow-tail coats and ladies dressed in satin gowns form a procession that meanders through the village of Moriah. Every year, a few newly married visitors join in.

The Blue Water Inn, located on the island's northeast tip, has both a wedding planner and scenic venues for your vows: a pristine sand beach or poolside overlooking the turquoise water with a backdrop of Batteaux Bay and the mountainous spine of Little Tobago.

Paperwork is minimal; you'll need to be in Tobago for three days, bring notarized copies of any previous divorces plus a photo i.d. (passport) and apply for a license (about \$55 USD).

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