

A Place to Build a Dream On

When it comes to a choice of reception venue, many couples are thinking outside the hall or hotel ballroom. Alternative venues can offer charm and character, but can also pose particular problems of their own, so be sure you know what to look for and what you want.

by Shelley Arnusch

These days, going to the chapel doesn't necessarily mean going to the hotel ballroom afterward.

More and more Calgary couples are thinking outside the big square box when it comes to their wedding receptions, opting instead for unconventional venues like art galleries and restaurants. In doing so, they're eschewing longstanding traditions like the sit-down-banquet-with-head-table format and paring down their guest lists in order to fit into boutique-sized spaces.

According to Lisa Hanslip, owner and operator of The Wedding Planner Inc., "The more character you're looking for, then, ideally, the fewer guests."

But for the couple that comes prepared to throw convention to the wind, location options are nearly limitless.

Those seeking an urban-contemporary vibe for their big day are behind the rise in popularity of art-gallery receptions, says wedding planner Amira Harris of Posh Productions.

"People are going for a lounge effect, bringing in lots of furniture, cocktail tables and cruiser tables, and doing a fully catered, à la carte-style cocktail reception — food all night instead of a sit-down dinner, but still having lots of seating," says Harris, who has staged weddings at Art Gallery of Calgary, Endeavor Arts & Event Space and the Gerry Thomas Gallery.

While this smart, sophisticated style might come across as effortlessly chic, the gallery wedding has its own unique set of challenges, starting with, well, the art. Potential gallery-wedding couples need to understand the elegant, black-and-white landscape photography that was on display during the location scouting tour might have turned into a brash series of oversized nudes by the time the wedding rolls around. Art galleries are also not the best choice if the wedding guest list has a lot of young kids, who may not understand the art is for looking at and not for touching.

"Many galleries have a very strict contract to protect the art," says Harris. "You have to

avenue Weddings



Far left The historic Lougheed house.

Left Endeavor Arts & Event Space, like many gallery settings, is a blank slate for your wedding.

Bottom, far left Bonterra Trattoria set up for a wedding.

Bottom left Private rooms at the Calgary Zoo can accommodate small to large groups.

Lisa busy at work setting up the space



take out additional liability insurance in case something does get damaged, so that is another cost factor to think of."

Aside from the art, the blank-canvas aspect of the gallery space means extra costs will be incurred from having to create an environment from scratch.

"If you have a tight budget, I wouldn't recommend it," says Harris. "Better to go for something more traditional, like a hotel that includes chairs and tables. When you do [your wedding] at a non-traditional venue, you're bringing everything in, absolutely every single thing, from catering to glasses to decor to furniture, everything under the sun."

This isn't necessarily the case with upscale restaurant weddings, which are also becoming an increasingly popular choice, especially among foodie couples that would rather call the whole thing off than serve their guests banquet-hall chicken cordon-bleu.

"My clients who opt for a restaurant venue may sacrifice having a large number of guests due to size restrictions but the tradeoff is a more intimate setting with amazing food, wine and ambiance for their guests," says wedding planner Terra Law of Inspired Occasions, who knows of events done at Rouge, Teatro, River Café and The Ranch.

Unlike galleries, which require a lot of outside furniture and accoutrements, restaurants come pre-furnished and pre-decorated.

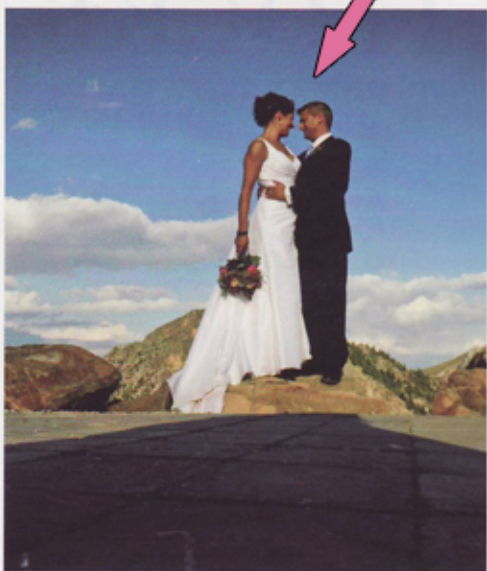
There's also an expectation a restaurant will bring a high standard of food, wine and service to the table.

If there's a downside to using restaurants as wedding venues, it's that the layout isn't usually planned with unobstructed sightlines in mind, meaning some guests at a sit-down dinner likely won't have a very good view of the happy couple. One way around this is to use the restaurant space to host a cocktail party event, but then the issue becomes the flipside of the gallery wedding — that is, what to do with all the tables and chairs, which need to be moved out and stored for the evening.

"You can't have the character and the service and the food necessarily with the easy-to-work-with floor plan," says Hanslip. "You just have to change your expectations of the dynamic of what the event might look like, but that doesn't mean it won't be fabulous and memorable and the perfect thing for you."

One thing that's guaranteed not to be perfect is the weather in this part of the world. Even so, outdoor weddings are still in high demand, often against wedding planners' advice. "I think that's something that lots of brides dream of, but in southern Alberta, I will not take an outdoor wedding unless there is a reasonable backup that won't make the bride cry," says Hanslip.

Still, the reasons to have an outdoor wedding often have more to do with the extended family's connection to a particular piece



Eagle's Eye Terrace at Kicking Horse Resort
in Golden, B.C.

of land than with the whims of the bride. The logistics of staging an outdoor wedding are almost as formidable as the weather — everything from toilets to tables and chairs have to be carted to the site, not to mention the challenges in preparing and serving food in an area far removed from kitchen facilities, which, depending on the meal, might have to be created in an adjacent tent.

One way to get the outdoor country wedding vibe without having to start from the ground up is to go with a seasonal tented venue, such as the one Great Events Group has been running for the past two years at the Anderson Ranch equestrian farm just south of Calgary, or the new permanent tent which opened at Spruce Meadows last summer. The Spruce Meadows tent remains up through the spring and summer, and has beautiful touches like chandelier lighting and elegant draping, as well as less-graceful, but much more important features like permanent washrooms.

Another option is to choose a venue with an adjacent garden, such as Rouge Restaurant. It's one way to have your outdoor wedding and your fancy dining reception, too, plus, if and when the wind whips up and the hail starts crashing down, it's easy to get everyone inside *tout de suite*.

In the end, the perfect venue may be the one that requires the least amount of planning and tweaking and bending, which is why the hotel ballroom remains a wedding reception staple.

"Honestly," says Hanslip, "it's rare that a venue is going to check off every single box." ■