



Here Comes The Wedding Planner

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"These days, even British brides know that for a perfect Big Day, there's someone almost as vital as the groom.."

When *The Wedding Planner* opened in cinemas four years ago, the reaction of most people on this side of the Atlantic was "the wedding what?". Wedding planners were an American thing. Here, marquees-on-the-lawn organised by the mother of the bride still reigned supreme. Yet in the intervening years, wedding planning has become part of the national scenery. With the average wedding costing Pounds 16,000, and many hovering around the Pounds 25,000 mark, there is a lot of money, not to mention happiness, resting on a single day.

Yet the wedding planning industry is completely unregulated: no research exists on how many planners there are, what, if any, qualifications they have or whether they provide a decent service. At the moment, all most brides have to work on is recommendation.

Bernadette Chapman, founder of the UK Alliance of Wedding Planners, is trying to change that. "A lot of people start doing this as a hobby, and fail pretty quickly," she says. "Because they've got married themselves,

they think they can be a wedding planner. We've heard so many horror stories about people who see a website, hand over money and nothing happens. We're working to standardise the industry, so that if a bride wants to hire a planner, she knows our members have been vetted, we've seen their references and checked their public liability insurance." Though not yet as popular as in America, she reckons, "We're definitely getting there. The main thing is having people go into it as a profession."

Not surprisingly, Chapman says it's a lack of time that first attracts people to using a planner, but they're then pleasantly surprised by how much money they can save: suppliers will give a planner discounts that they wouldn't give to a bride (the bride's only getting married once, but the planner can give repeat business). It can also be about one-upmanship.

"There is an element of their wanting their wedding to be better than their friends', not necessarily in terms of money spent, but in terms of individuality. Wedding planners," she says, "are great at the little things the bride will notice as soon as she walks in. We used to be only for the rich and famous, but not any more. Now anyone can use us." As for the mothers, she admits they often start off feeling pushed out, but the vast majority come round to the idea, if only on the day itself, "because we're doing the running around, not them".

Like any area, wedding planning has its share of cowboys (enter "wedding planner UK" into Google and you get 791,000 results). But the best of the bunch show just why it's a booming industry: they bring time, experience and economies of scale and can come up with ideas that the bride may never have envisaged.

Planner Giulia Cassini, who's trilingual and specialises in weddings in Italy and the South of France, says she puts together ceremonies "that you just can't organise yourself". Here, the most planners have to contend with is finding the right castle in Scotland, or peonies out of season. In America, it's a whole other ball game: there is a perceived hierarchy of planners, based largely on the celebrity and/or bank balance of clients, who habitually work with budgets of \$5,000 per person.

They have arranged floral collars for animals, sewn marigolds into curtains and, on one occasion, built a synagogue. One planner says her trademark is "surprising set-ups, like a late-night bakery". Clearly we still have some way to go.

THE WEDDING: Lisa Colegate, 36, and Scott Mackay, 35, Dorset, September 3
BUDGET: £12,000 **WHO'S PAYING:** Lisa and Scott Wedding planner: Angie Lambert and Nicky Ward, Dorset **HOURS SPENT PLANNING:** 250 **EXPENSES SO FAR** - Venue: Café Shore, Poole, £500 Food: £3,900 Drink: £900 Dress: £500 Live band: £1,200 Pebble art: £1 per pebble Horse and carriage: £425

Lisa Colegate's first reaction to the idea of a wedding planner was horror. Too foreign, she thought, and certainly too expensive. Then she faced facts: an air stewardess for BA, Lisa flies long-haul and lives in Dorset. Her fiancé, Scott Mackay, 35, an ex-Marine, is working in Iraq. Any downtime they get is taken up by their five-year-old daughter, who is looked

after by an au pair at their home in Poole. For Lisa, organising her wedding was not an option.

On the recommendation of a friend, she called Angie, 42, and Nicky, 38.

The brief was simple: elegant, unstuffy and low-key. At 25, she admits, she might have been tempted by the big church wedding approach, but at 36, and with Scott marrying for the second time, simplicity was the order of the day (though she is toying with the idea of arriving in a horse and carriage).

"If my mum had been around, I would have probably put it in her hands," she says, "but sadly she died. She would have been doing all these things, taking me to the wedding shop and saying, 'You look like a princess.' But that wasn't going to happen."

The key to the planner/bride relationship is, Nicky believes, "trying to match our ideas to their personality". They speak regularly to Lisa by phone, and act as a kind of mission control.

Lisa and Scott thought about getting married in a renovated barn, but finally opted for the function room of a local restaurant, which will have stunning views over Poole harbour. Around 40 of their closest friends will be at the ceremony and the sit-down meal afterwards, with 100 more coming to the evening party.

If the weather holds, the plan is to have photos taken in the nearby sand dunes, with the beach theme continued in the venue - Angie and Nicky came up with the idea of using pebbles as name cards, with the date of the wedding painted on the back for guests to take home. "I want the ceremony to be very intimate, and then in the evening for everyone to have a party and get drunk," says Lisa. "All Scott wants to do is turn up on the day, but the more you talk about it, the more exciting it gets: even he's now asking what's happening."

THE WEDDING: Alexandra Laurie, 32, and Oliver Black, 33, Italy, June 18
BUDGET: £25,000 **WHO'S PAYING:** Alexandra, Oliver, both parents **WEDDING PLANNER:** Giulia Cassini, By Cassini **HOURS SPENT PLANNING:** 150 **EXPENSES SO FAR** - Venue: Villa di Maiano, Florence, £3,300 Catering: £6,000 Dress: £2,000+ Music: £1,800 Flowers: £1,400 Ceremony: £700 Photographer: £1,500

You might think that someone who works for a bridal magazine could organise their own wedding. In her job at Conde Nast Brides, Alexandra spends her life surrounded by wedding paraphernalia, but when it came to arranging her own she had the same problem as anyone else: not enough time. She and her fiancé wanted to get married in Italy because they love it. But they had no idea who to approach about catering or photography or flowers, and in any case, they couldn't speak Italian.

"We needed someone on the ground over there," says Alexandra, who was alerted to By Cassini by a colleague. "Giulia and I chatted on the phone and clicked instantly. My fiancé runs his own company and I work on a busy

magazine, so having someone who could take a bit of pressure away would be a godsend." (Her mother wasn't quite so sure, and initially "felt out of the loop", but having been on one of the recces, she now feels more involved.) After two trips to look at eight venues shortlisted by Giulia - many of them private homes you wouldn't normally be able to see - Alexandra and Oliver chose Villa di Maiano, a Renaissance palace, whose gardens have stunning views over Florence. There will be champagne and food for their 100 guests when they arrive on the Friday night, then the wedding, in the gardens, on the Saturday.

Afterwards, drinks on the villa's terrace will be followed by a traditional Italian six-course banquet. "The catering is the majority of the budget because it's so important to get right," says Alexandra, who will get married in a couture dress by Philippa Lepley. "But now I've organised my own wedding, I've sworn I will never be critical of anyone else's ever again!..."

Alexandra and Giulia have planned the day with military precision. Nothing has been left to chance - the villa even has a chapel in case it rains - and Giulia will be there on the day, orchestrating the flow of events.

"Anyone who's been married knows how long it takes to plan a wedding," she says, "and a lot of people are doing weddings that are different. That's why people need planners."

"She channels my thought processes," says Alexandra. "It's like having a big safety net. What Giulia's great at is creating that relaxed informality that looks like you've thrown it together, but which you actually have had to work very hard to create."

THE WEDDING: Tzo Tze Ang, 26, and Eashwar Krishnan, 28, Hampshire, July 31
BUDGET: £29,000 **WHO'S PAYING:** Tzo Tze and Eashwar **WEDDING PLANNER:** Kelly Chandler, The Bespoke Wedding Company **HOURS SPENT PLANNING:** 150 **EXPENSES SO FAR** - Venue: Somerley, a stately home, £4,200 Dress: £2,000 Flowers: £1,500 Jazz band: £1,050 String quartet: £800 Videographer: £1,300 Hair and make-up for bridal party: £500 Lunch, afternoon tea, Pimm's: £5,800

Tzo Tze and Eashwar are having three weddings: in September, Eashwar's mother is organising one in his hometown of Chennai, while Tzo Tze's mother is in charge of the traditional Malaysian event in Kuala Lumpur. But first is an English "afternoon tea" wedding in July, mainly for their English friends, who will nonetheless be invited to all three weddings. The theme came about because Tzo Tze and Eashwar, who both work in the City, met at Trinity College, Cambridge, where one of their fondest memories is of sitting on the Backs during summer, drinking champagne and going to garden parties: they wanted to recreate that atmosphere.

Tzo Tze had used a party planner before, and loved the fact that it meant she could get on with chatting to her friends and not worry about supplies of food and drink, or candles burning down. So in January, she Googled wedding planner, interviewed five people, and settled on Kelly. "They all provided the same basic service, so it came down to who I got along with. Kelly came up with ideas that we just didn't think of, like the croquet. That was exactly the sort of thing we wanted, but we didn't realise it.

Plus she takes out all the really boring bits, and I get the fun bits like picking a venue."

"Tzo Tze could have spent weeks looking at unsuitable venues," points out Kelly. "We're familiar with hundreds, so can narrow it down. The same goes for photographers, florists, cakes..." The wedding will be, Tzo Tze hopes, an informal affair. There's a midday blessing, followed by drinks, lunch in the picture gallery and afternoon tea in the garden, with croquet and a jazz band.

"I think more and more people are short of time," says Kelly, "and realise the value of outsourcing things in their life to those who have the time and the expertise that they lack. People are spending increasing amounts on weddings, and want them to be really special days: sometimes you might need some help achieving that."