

Breaking Down Your Role as the Destination Wedding Ceremony Planner – Part 1

(2025 Certification)

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Who's in charge now? You are!

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Your new role: wedding planner

Until now, you've served your clients as their travel advisor - recommending DW destinations and resorts/ships and handling their bookings.

Now, **you'll add another "hat" as their DW ceremony planner!**

Depending on the couple, you'll advise them on ceremony packages and help them select and confirm ceremony services. And, you may even accompany them on their DW trips and help coordinate the live ceremonies!

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Your new role: wedding planner

Now, **you'll represent them officially as their chosen ceremony planner.**

The suppliers' on-site wedding coordinators are NOT the couple's wedding planners. They work for the suppliers, not your couple. They're "in charge" on site, but they're not ultimately responsible for your couple's best interests - you are.

That's a huge selling point for you with your clients!

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Setting the ceremony direction

The first step in acting as your couple's ceremony planner is **helping them define the ceremony - the logistics and the "feel."**

In many cases, that can start with a **"vision board"** - a collection of colors, images, and inspirations capturing the mood and style your clients want for their Big Day.

First, ask them questions to get them started:

- How did you meet?
- What are your favorite things to do together?
- How do you want your guests to feel after the ceremony?
- What memories do you want to have from the ceremony a year later?

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Setting the ceremony direction

You can also ask them to list words describing what they want from the ceremony in terms of the style, the mood, and the feel.

Then, they can gather their thoughts in a physical format (a binder, a poster board) or a digital format (Canva, Pinterest, Adobe Firefly Boards).

Next, they can gather images and text that reminds them of what they want for their ceremony: their chosen colors, the destination, the desired venue, and the ceremony elements (e.g., flowers, music). Let this initial collection sit for a while, and then go back and "edit" things to end up with a firm grasp of their ceremony goals.

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Setting the ceremony direction



Rebecca Grinnals (co-founder of Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings program and of the Engage luxury wedding planner summits)

"3 Colors, 4 Adjectives" formula

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Canva "vision board" template

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The date and time

"When" is the next big ceremony question!

As the planner, **you should guide your couples on this decision based on these factors:**

- The available schedule for the chosen venue
- Dates that carry meaning for the couple
- The impact of the chosen date on their guests - especially VIPs (family, jobs, their own calendars)
- Days of the week

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The date and time

- The seasons (especially for outdoor ceremonies), including hurricane periods
- Holidays (including those specific to the destination) and busy periods (spring break, college football season)

In terms of the time, **consider everything from the comfort of the guests** (e.g., midday heat) **to the natural lighting for photos**. And, remember that everyone wants that sunset hour!

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The venue

"Where" is an easy decision for hometown ceremonies - but destination weddings give your couples so many more options!

Just think about the typical resort:

- Beach locations (on the sand or in structures such as gazebos)
- Outdoor venues such as gardens and patios/terraces
- Indoor venues such as ballrooms and chapels
- Rooftop terraces and bar/dining areas

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The venue

Cruise options can include dedicated wedding areas such as onboard chapels as well as other public spaces (libraries, specialty dining restaurants, private deck areas), as well as off-ship venues while the vessel is in port.

Here's where the supplier's policy on how many ceremonies it will allow per day becomes important. Always ask so you can check where "competing" ceremonies that day may be taking place compared to your couple's venue.

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The venue

Consider the venue's layout to make sure it fits the ceremony components the couple want for the ceremony (e.g., is the beach too windy for the delicate flower arrangements they want?).

Think also about the impact on guests (e.g., will they have to take a long downhill path to the beach that may not be easy for everyone?).

Ask suppliers about "Plan B" options in case of bad weather or other unforeseen problems.

Finally, **get complete details about any restrictions** such as noise limitations or bans on certain decor (e.g., the resort doesn't allow open flames in ballrooms where a South Asian ceremony is being planned).

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The ceremony order

Here's the typical, traditional timeline for a destination wedding ceremony:

(Seating of guests beforehand)

- Processional (officiant and groom, grandparents and parents on both sides, the wedding party [usually in pairs, with the best man and maid of honor last], the ring bearer and flower girl, and the bride with her chosen escort)
- Welcome
- Prayer
- Reading
- Wedding message

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The ceremony order

- Wedding vows
- Ring exchange
- Unity ceremony (optional - mixing sand in a bowl, lighting candles, planting a tree)
- Reading
- Closing statements
- Presentation of newlyweds and the kiss
- Recessional

But, **DW couples also have TREMENDOUS freedom to change up this order** any way they wish! Encourage your clients to switch things up, cut elements out ... anything they want.

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The ceremony package

Here are **the typical inclusions in a supplier's basic DW ceremony package**:

- The services of the on-site wedding coordinator
- The wedding officiant (a licensed minister or judge plus witnesses if required [legal ceremonies] or a nondenominational officiant [symbolic ceremonies])
- The use of the wedding venue
- Basic decor (e.g., an arch or canopy, chairs for guests, plus any flowers or fabrics listed in the package description)
- Bridal bouquet and groom boutonniere
- Sound system with microphone and speaker (and possibly recorded music for processional and recessional)

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The ceremony package

This basic package may be free for the couple if they fill a specific number of room nights in their group contract. If not, it's usually quoted for a maximum number of guests (e.g., \$1,499 for up to 20 people). Your couple can add more guests for a per-person charge.

Beyond the basic package, many suppliers offer higher-level packages with extra services and higher-quality inclusions (including cocktail hours and receptions).

The critical step with these supplier ceremony packages is **reading the fine print very carefully!** Make sure you understand precisely what is being included - and what is NOT being promised. (For example, many cruise DW packages mention "the services of a ship photographer" - that means the presence of the photographer at the ceremony, but it does not include a single photo [those are extra].)

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The ceremony package

There are no hard-and-fast rules regarding whether packages are "customizable" to any degree. Some suppliers will allow couples to ask for different types of flowers in the bridal bouquet, for example, at no extra charge - while others will say upfront that changes are not possible. So, it always pays to ask for your couple - and then explain to them the rules and any extra costs required if they insist on customizations.

In addition to these ceremony packages, **many suppliers also have lists of "add-on services"** that couples may request - everything from photo booths to dance floors, live musicians to beach fireworks displays. Always ask the coordinator for this list and share it with the couple - and, again, help them understand the costs and the "fine print."

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Off-site/outside vendors

While the services promised in the supplier's packages will be provided by its in-house vendors and employees in most cases, **your couple may opt instead to hire their own "off-site" vendors** to provide key services. For example, they may prefer to bring their family minister with them to perform the ceremony, or they may choose a skilled independent DW photographer to take shots instead of the resort's photographer.

Many resorts charge hefty fees to permit couples to bring these outside vendors onto the property for the ceremony, so check those fees and any other restrictions on such vendors. In some cases, those vendors must also meet local regulations to be permitted to work in the destination (a rule that applies especially to vendors the couple might bring with them into the destination). And, be prepared that some resorts may actually ban the use of outside vendors completely.

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Off-site/outside vendors

With cruise weddings, it's much more difficult to bring these vendors onboard the vessel, so your couple may need to plan an in-port ceremony to use them.

How can you help your couples find outside vendors? Sometimes, the on-site coordinators will actually refer you to local vendors they've worked with. You can also check with any local tourism offices, try "old fashioned" Googling for them - or, ask your fellow DWHSA members in our FB group!

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The officiant

If the ceremony must be lawfully binding, the officiant must be approved in the destination to perform that service. Usually, that means a judge, justice of the peace, or minister with the legal authority to administer vows.

If the ceremony must be religiously compliant (e.g., Jewish, Catholic, Hindu), then the officiant must be approved by that faith to conduct the ceremony (but in most cases it won't be lawfully binding, so the couple will need to say "legal" vows separately).

If the ceremony is symbolic, then the couple has more flexibility to choose the officiant who fits their style and beliefs. In some destinations, that person must register locally for permission to conduct the ceremony if she/he is being paid for the service.

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The officiant

If you need to help your couple locate an officiant, consider her/his credentials (especially licensure if this is a legal ceremony), language skills, and the "vibe" with the couple.

What if someone like a family member needs help qualifying as an officiant? There are options for them to be "ordained" through online sources such as these:

Universal Life Church

<https://www.ulc.org/>

American Marriage Ministries

<https://theamm.org/>

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The decor

Generally with DWs, **"the destination is the decor"** - especially if the ceremony will be held outdoors. Beyond extra florals and structural decor (e.g., chairs, an arch or canopy, an altar or draped table), there's rarely any need for additional decor (unless the ceremony will be held inside and the available space is bare).

The resort or ship will provide the basics: chairs and (if desired) an arch/canopy and altar. Your couple may wish to add "extras" such as an aisle runner, chair covers, and signs.

In many cases, **the only extra decor that may be required is lighting**, especially if the ceremony will take place outdoors at sunset or night or if the indoor location is dark. (Of course, your clients are welcome to go wild with disco lights if they wish - it's their Big Day!)

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The decor

In addition, they may also have sentimental items that are meaningful to them (e.g., a family Bible) or a guest book. Remind them that truly irreplaceable items should be transported in their carry-on bags (and insured if appropriate).

Sometimes, your clients may ask if they can bring their own "packable" decor (e.g., paper lanterns, frames). If they ship these items ahead of time, remind them to label the boxes as "gifts" or "personal wedding items" and specify that they are not "merchandise" (to try to avoid any fees or delays with customs).

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Questions?

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DWHSA's Facebook group

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