

Ombak Sunset

Romance
TRAVEL TRENDS

FOR THE NEW DECADE


SAINT LUCIA



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With the start of the new decade we wanted to dig in and learn what's in store for the romance travel segment in the 2020s and beyond. Of course, this decade is turning out to be quite different than what we had in mind when we initially put together the concept for this trends piece. The world turned upside-down, and travel came to a screeching halt as the globe went into quarantine. As I write this report, countries around the world are starting to slowly reopen their borders, cautiously optimistic that we, at the very least, have a bit of a handle on the situation. Destinations, hotels, tour operators, cruise lines, airlines...every segment of the travel & tourism industry took the time during quarantine to create safety and health protocols and reimagine what a vacation looks like in this so-called New Normal.

In this report, we'll touch on how this affects the romance travel segment, but we'll also talk about romance travel trends in general, including destination weddings, which might be more intimate for a while, but won't be postponed forever; honeymoons, which, for now, might not take place right after the wedding, but won't be going away; and how romance, and the celebrations that come with it, continues to bloom.

For this Romance Travel Trends for the New Decade Report—a complement to the Romance Travel Trends for the New Decade Survey conducted on [recommend.com](https://www.recommend.com), as well as the Romance Travel Trends for the New Decade Webinar—we reached out to experts—travel advisors, island destinations, all-inclusive hotels, and small ship and river cruise lines—in the romance travel segment to gain insight into what romance travelers want and to help you better sell to this market.

ROMANCE IS IN FULL BLOOM



"COVID-19 has undeniably changed the way we travel, but the reasons we vacation with the ones we love are the same," says Kristin Karst, **AmaWaterways'** executive v.p. and co-founder. "Couples are looking to share new experiences together and create magical memories." Richard Moss, sr. sales manager, USA at **Saint Lucia Tourism Authority**, agrees, noting that, "From all indications, destination weddings and romance travel will continue to be popular, however their execution will be more meticulously executed with new attention to social distancing protocol as well as new opportunities for creativity."

Natalia Greene, director of marketing at Saint Lucia's **Coconut Bay Beach Resort & Spa** and **Serenity at Coconut Bay**, says that "there is more optimism and confidence in 2021 travel for destination weddings than in 2020. Our wedding couples that postponed from this summer to

next summer did so in the hope that the economy and incomes will bounce back, and travel restrictions will not be as challenging by next year." Cybelle Brown, managing director of **Stonefield Villa Resort**, also in Saint Lucia, notes that although couples with larger wedding groups have cancelled, "they are keeping their honeymoon plans and rescheduling based on flights and work schedules. Couples are also choosing to elope to avoid the challenges of dealing with rescheduling family and friends."

In fact, says Marilyn Cairo, v.p. of global sales for **Premier Worldwide Marketing**, the exclusive worldwide representatives for **Karisma Hotels & Resorts**, points to romance travel as being a "recession-proof niche. Even as our day-to-day 'normal' is completely redefined, this segment of the market has seen a relatively minimal shift. There's still a clear desire for couples to 'get away' from it

all for an intimate celebration with loved ones; that type of bucket list experience has remained high priority."

Luz Maria Martinez, corporate director of romance, **Paradisus by Melia & Melia Hotels & Resorts**, adds that couples "are doing their research on how resort brands are handling the new safety protocols & guidelines, this allows to ease any concerns. With this in mind, it allows them to be confident moving forward with a new date and of course become comfortable with a new normal." ➤

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"Everyone wants to feel safe and comfortable in this new normal. This new normal unfortunately means leaving some senior family members and those with comprised immune systems at home for their safety. One of my European groups opted to rebook in 2022, but this time without the grandparents."

-- **Dawn Warner**,
Travel Advisor, Dream Vacations Franchisee



CHA-CHING!

Almost half of survey respondents say that their clients are spending anywhere from **\$15,500 to \$40,500+** for their destination wedding. And when it comes to honeymoons, 80 percent of survey respondents say couples are spending **\$5,000 to \$20,000**.



"The new shift we've seen really has been in the size of the weddings," continues Paradisus' Martinez. "The unforeseen events over the last couple of months have made couples rethink their wedding day, opting for a more intimate setting. This allows them to truly personalize down to the smallest detail, truly enjoy their day with their closest family and friends and spend their budget wisely."

"So certain items such as self-serve buffets are a thing of the past, and smaller seating arrangements respecting all social distancing guidelines have been implemented for both indoor and outdoor venues."

Over at **Palace & Le Blanc Resorts**, new F&B protocols are also on the menu. Buffets have gone bye-bye, replaced, says Deyanira Sosa, U.S. groups & weddings sales director for Palace & Le Blanc Resorts, with "plated dining experiences," with Coconut Bay's Greene agreeing: "Wedding parties will be seated at smaller dining tables with social distancing taken into account, and everything will be individually plated." That said, she does note that no matter if the wedding groups are smaller, or more intimate, "the celebration and the backdrops will look as stunning as they have always been"—remind your clients about that. ➤

Intimate Gatherings

On average, destination weddings are made up of **11 to 50** guests, according to survey respondents.



"Couples are looking into wanting smaller, more intimate weddings; they're looking for more organic offerings on the menu and they're more environmentally conscious."

**-- Luz Maria Martinez, Corporate Director of Romance,
Paradisus by Melia & Melia Hotels & Resorts**

THE PERFECT SETTING IN A NEW NORMAL *continued...*

In fact, says Saint Lucia Tourism Authority's Moss, "While there will be adjustments made, guests and especially wedding couples will still have a spectacular experience filled with Instagrammable moments," adding that the island is "working diligently to provide memorable food and beverage experiences to wedding groups, while being particularly vigilant about new COVID-19 protocols. Hotels are developing creative solutions for serving cocktails, eliminating buffet-style stations, providing the traditional fun wedding rituals and more."

Another shift that the industry has seen is the interest in resort buyouts or villa rentals by wedding groups. **Anguilla Tourist Board's** manager of corporate affairs Shellya K. Webster points out that at "the island's 168-room **Four Seasons** property, there's an increase in intimate *Villa* experiences, as well as an increased interest in *Buy Out* experiences. This allows for wedding groups to have a 35-acre resort all to themselves, and you can let your clients know that they can control their environment with this option." In Puerto Rico, Brad Dean, CEO, **Discover Puerto Rico**, says he's seeing a shift to couples choosing more outdoor venues, "in comparison to pre-COVID-19, with some properties seeing a 90 percent increase in these requests. Wide-open spaces and outdoor venues allow for mandated social distancing." ➤

"While there will be adjustments made, guests and especially wedding couples will still have a spectacular experience filled with Instagrammable moments, the traditional Champagne toast and culinary offerings personalized for each group."
-- **Richard Moss, Senior Sales Manager, USA, Saint Lucia Tourism Authority**

A Walk Down the Aisle

Survey says...
The Bahamas, Dominican Republic, Hawaii, Jamaica and Mexico are among the most popular choices for a destination wedding.





HONEYMOON BLISS

"Definitely, we think travelers, in general, will be looking for more privacy in this new landscape," says Oneil Khosa, **Bahamas Paradise Cruise Line's** CEO. Paradisus' Martinez concurs. "As travel restrictions are slowly being lifted, couples have been dreaming and planning their first post-quarantine romantic getaway," she notes. In other words, couples are ready to celebrate love, and if honeymoons have been postponed, they're ready to start thinking about them again. Palace's Sosa has seen honeymooners keeping their original plan, albeit changing the dates. "We have seen that the majority of couples have been sticking to their original itineraries but have also been taking extra precautions. This means they are booking everything (like transportation, tours, add-ons) through us."

Travel advisor Dawn Warner, **Dream Vacations** franchisee, says she's seen her honeymooners push their travel dates back by six to eight

months for fear of the unknown. They are afraid of investing large sums of money and possibly waiting 90 days for a refund. The great part is even with their heightened fear level, they are still interested in creating a special travel memory and booking. Instead of 2020, couples are exploring 2021 dates, although honeymoons are going from 14 days to seven."

Karisma's Conroy says that one of the trends for couples emerging from the pandemic is "transparency. It's taken on a new meaning, in that now couples expect transparency surrounding safety and sanitation."

Another trend is the rise in in-room dining ordering, but when it comes to romance, especially during a honeymoon, it takes on a whole new meaning. Betsy O'Rourke, CMO, **Xanterra** and **Windstar Cruises**, notes that at Windstar, they'll be "encouraging this option even more now and adding new items to the menu. Amphora's full dinner menu will be available for room service.

Couples can indulge in the made-to-order items and enjoy it in bed or in their seating area." She also adds that couples can still have "date night" at Candles, watching the sun set over a postcard harbor, noting that "tables are spread out from other diners, and we'll be offering expanded meal times to ensure even fewer tables are occupied at any one time in all our venues."

Bahamas Paradise Cruise Line's Khosa adds that "shore excursions will be limited to half capacity, and couples, in particular, may enjoy this, as it reinforces the idea of a private, romantic getaway both on the ship and while relaxing at the beach." He adds that while on the ship, "couples can request special offerings like Champagne breakfast with a side of mimosas, or a quiet romantic dinner while enjoying stellar ocean views." ➤

"The romance will still be there—as special touches like candlelight dinners by the beach, live music and nightly shows, but we will be respecting social distancing guidelines."

-- Deyanira Sosa, U.S. Groups & Weddings Sales Director, Palace & Le Blanc Resorts

Top Honeymoon Spots

Among our survey respondents, **SAINT LUCIA** topped the list when it came to the most popular destination for newlyweds to snuggle during their honeymoon. Other popular spots? **Greece, Hawaii, Jamaica, Maldives, Mexico, and Tahiti.**



I D POINT YOUR CLIENTS TO GREAT ROMANCE EXPERIENCES

So, what do some of the hotels, cruise lines and destinations that are focused on romance travel have on offer for your clients?

Small ship and river cruising have always been an ideal recommendation for couples, but now it's a resounding recommendation, as travelers seek out even more private excursions, intimate spaces, and settings made for just the "two of us." O'Rourke says smaller ships make for plenty of opportunities for "private togetherness." They "offer an uncrowded experience for all guests, including couples—leaving lots of room for romance. On Windstar, it's not uncommon to be the only people in a hot tub. Or the only ones you see walking on the deck or taking in a sunset. There are no lines to stand in, or tables to rush to reserve, deck chairs to vie for each day." AmaWaterways' Karst adds that the "nature of river cruising guarantees an intimate, immersive experience. For example, our ships accommodate an average of about 150 guests, and our shore excursions are done in small groups. With no more than 15-20 guests per group, our shore excursions are quite intimate in nature, and our guests also have the option to explore a destination at their leisure by bike or on foot. In this new travel landscape, more travelers may take advantage of this 'personalized' tour option, asking our knowledgeable cruise managers, crew members and

guides for their local insight and destination expertise to map out their day." She adds that couples sailing with AmaWaterways can take bike rides along a quiet riverside path, or they can opt for long solitary bike rides through fairytale-like settings where castles were built, and kings and queens were crowned. Even if they decide to join the group shore excursions, they are no more than 15 to 20 guests, so they are "intimate in nature," she says.

O'Rourke points to Windstar's new array of shore excursions. "Our *Beyond Ordinary* tours are comprised of the most over-the-top experiences that deserve to be called 'once in a lifetime,' such as a panoramic helicopter flight from Monte Carlo that transports guests to Alain Ducasse's La Bastide de Moustiers in Provence for a Michelin-starred lunch. A bit less high-flying but still exceptional is an excursion in Roses, Spain, with access to the Sant Pere de Rodes Monastery for a private yoga session on the rooftop, followed by brunch with views of the Mediterranean Sea."

Back on dry land, Dean says that for couples headed to Puerto Rico, there seems to be a "growing interest in outdoor experiences. After being home-bound due to current stay-at-home restrictions, people will be

craving fresh air and spending time outdoors, and Puerto Rico provides just that—from the only rainforest in the U.S. forest system, to a dry forest, three of the world's five bio bays, stunning waterfalls, and several cave systems." Anguilla, meanwhile, is, according to Webster, a "low-density, low-volume destination," with 33 uncrowded beaches. She points to hotels such as **Quintessence, Frangipani, Tranquility Beach** and **Long Bay Villas** as ideal recommendations for romantic escapes.

In Saint Lucia, Stonefield's Brown notes that "on-island romantic experiences like sunset cruises offered by hotels and tours will integrate social distancing and the necessary protocols. For vow renewals where couples want family or friends with them, the demand for accommodation type will adjust. There will be a greater demand for large private villas so that small groups of family and friends can celebrate safely together."

It's all about the "personalized care from the staff," says Karisma's Conroy. That's what "leaves them wanting to come back year after year." She adds, too, that to "truly make the occasion 'special' requires a level of service that goes beyond expectations, like a stay in a special suite, VIP amenities." And she notes that when it comes to weddings, Karisma offers the opportunity for "couples to tie the knot on a rooftop terrace with 180-degree views of the ocean, or they can host their reception on a private overwater restaurant."

And whatever the option your clients want, post-COVID, romance, as these experts have said, will remain high on the desire list, because, as O'Rourke says, "romance isn't fostered by being in a crowd. It's about being with your partner in intimate moments."

Pre-Wedding Getaways

Survey respondents say that 86 percent of their destination wedding clients are **VERY LIKELY** or **LIKELY** to plan a destination-based bachelorette and bachelor getaway.



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- Access to SLAM – Saint Lucia Agent Month rates (June-November)
- Listing of qualified agents on Saint Lucia Tourism Authority: **stlucia.org**



Life's Unforgettable Moments Happen Here

On The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel, romance is always present and inspiring – it's a natural phenomenon. Our white-sand beaches, secluded islands and tropical wildlife enhance the special moments that happen here every day. Sunsets highlight intimate walks on quiet beaches. Kayaking through mangrove tunnels rekindles a sense of adventure. And sailing to uninhabited islands off the coast makes a private getaway to remember. When you discover a place that's as intimate as the love your clients share, you know it's meant to be.

No matter the romantic occasion your clients are looking for, Fort Myers & Sanibel provide the right backdrop for love. Weddings here are a breeze, whether your clients dream of saying "I do" on the sand or at one of the stunning venues in our destination. The breadth of services and expertise of our service professionals makes your clients' wishes come true on their big day.

For clients looking to pop the question, our shores strewn with seashells along the Gulf of Mexico make an inspiring backdrop for any proposal. For honeymoons, weddings, babymoons or simply the need for an escape, there's ideal lodging, sun-soaked experiences and special amenities to create the couples' vacation of your clients' dreams.

We understand times are different, but we remain that special place where love can flourish. When the time feels right for them, we'll be ready to welcome your clients to our shores.

Discover The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel

From exploring the historic downtown River District to boating between islands, discover your clients' next great vacation on The Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel. You'll find commissionable rates, first-class accommodations and add value to your clients' next getaway with the help of our Travel Agent Help Desk. Call 800-237-6444 or visit FortMyers-Sanibel.com for more information.



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