

FUN FOR ALL

You've received the RSVPs. The guests are set to arrive. Now what? Follow our guide to playing ultimate hostess—from the beginning of your wedding weekend to when you bid them adieu.

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GIVE A WARM WELCOME

It doesn't matter if your loved ones are traveling by train, plane, or automobile. When they get to your location, they'll want a cold beverage (or hot toddy, depending on the weather) and a few moments to refresh and recharge. Have the hotel staff greet everyone with a drink, and leave a handwritten note in each room that says something along the lines of, "Cheers to your arrival! We look forward to seeing you soon."

And while welcome bags aren't a requisite, they're a thoughtful way to give guests their bearings and a feel for the area. In lieu of standard-issue water bottles and pretzels, get creative: Bestow inexpensive flip-flops and towels at the beach, or street maps and a copy of *Time Out* magazine in the city. Or, if your friends like to work hard and play hard, event planner Bryan Rafanelli of Rafanelli Events in Boston suggests a "too much fun, too much sun" survival kit with an eye mask, sunblock, and aspirin. As a personal touch, include a homemade guidebook that steers them to your favorite local spots.



START OFF SLOW

As much as you'd like to get the party going on the first night, keep your welcome gathering casual since guests might be jet-lagged. "A laid-back cocktail party or informal dinner eases people into vacation mode and encourages conversations," says Beth Helmstetter of Beth Helmstetter Events in Los Angeles. This is also the best time for all your loved ones to meet one another before a more formal event, like your ceremony. To help them loosen up, incorporate an ice-breaking game. What do they all have in common? You and your fiancé. "Make a fun crossword puzzle with clues about you as a couple," suggests Todd Fiscus of Todd Events in Dallas (log on to varietygames.com to create one). Put them on tables, and

guests will work on them together. Talent shows, scavenger hunts, and karaoke are also good options. Then serve your favorite informal fare from the area and play music you love.

ARRANGE SOME GROUP ACTIVITIES

"When you host an outing, it gives guests an opportunity to get out and see the place they've traveled to," says contributing editor and planner Claudia Hanlin of the Wedding Library in New York City. The key is to entertain your friends without overwhelming them. Keep these pointers in mind: **Make the most of your locale** You chose your ceremony spot because you love it—and now's the chance to show everyone why. If you're crazy for the snorkeling in Cozumel, take guests to your favorite reef. To highlight the food in Italy, set up a traditional cooking class.

Include everyone Keep in mind that not everyone is comfortable in a swimsuit, and your elderly relatives may not be up for a hike. "Folks should be able to have fun whether they're participating or just observing from a distance," says Rafanelli. Ideal activities are those that are easy and don't leave anybody behind.

Be realistic You may like rock climbing, but why risk walking down the aisle on crutches? Just say no to anything that requires a stunt double.

TRIED-AND-TRUE TIP

"My maid-of-honor led a market tour, and our priest took us through a cathedral," says Meredith Pfeffer of her 2008 wedding in Aix-en-Provence, France. "It was more fun and affordable than hiring guides."



TRIED-AND-TRUE TIP

"We gave guests a list of restaurants so they could have a night to themselves," says Arthur Oder, who wed in Provincetown, Massachusetts, last year.

PENCIL IN SOME DOWNTIME

Yes, your friends and family are there to see you off into married bliss, but it's also their vacation, says planner Paige Appel, co-owner of Bash, Please in Culver City, California. To make sure they get the chance to hang out by the pool or explore the area independently—your homemade guidebook in hand—limit activities to one a day (nothing before 9:30 A.M.), and avoid anything too long or too far away. Fiscus likes to leave afternoons open so guests can go off on their own before dinner.

For those who will be staying close to the hotel, Hanlin suggests letting them know where they can find one another in your welcome packet or via the concierge. Think: "Want to bike the grounds? Meet in the lobby at 3" or "Stop by the bar's wine tasting at 5."

Last, don't schedule anything for the wedding day besides optional light exercise, like late-morning yoga or a walk, says Hanlin. Emphasis on optional, because you want them to save their energy for later!

END WITH A BANG

Saying goodbye is never easy (especially after a wonderful wedding weekend!), but there are ways to make it better. Brunch is one option. If you go that route, keep it informal and let people drop in anytime between 10 A.M. and noon so they can sleep in and pack.

Another luxurious alternative? Treating your attendees to breakfast in bed. Alison Hotchkiss of Alison Events in San Francisco has delivered pastries, fruit bowls, coffee-filled French presses, and local papers to rooms for bleary-eyed guests to enjoy at their leisure. (If you opted out of the “too much fun” kit, a Bloody Mary and aspirin might be wise, too.)

Finally, travel hassles risk tainting guests’ memory of the trip. To smooth their departure as much as possible, organize shuttle buses to bring them to the airport, suggests Hanlin, or prepare a box lunch for the flight so everyone feels pampered on the way home.

TRIED-AND-TRUE TIP

“On the last day, our guests were already talking about returning,” says Oder. “It was so rewarding to see them fall in love with Provincetown just as we did.”

