

Wedding Advice



| TO HAVE & TO HOLD

A collection of wedding advice and tips from a seasoned wedding professional and photographer.



Donald Sexton Photography

It is your story, being told
your way.

Hi! I'm Donald. I'm the owner and principal photographer of Donald Sexton Photography. I'm also a husband and father, so I know how important it is to capture life's fleeting moments. Based out of Clearwater, Florida, I've been shooting weddings for over ten years. I've been fortunate enough to capture a variety of "big days" from romantic nuptials on the beach to double weddings to intimate ceremonies between close family and friends. I am truly fortunate to be able to do what I love. Photography is not just a job, it is a big part of my life.

I'm a lifestyle photographer, which means that I capture life naturally, as it happens. I pride myself in capturing candid moments that are often missed by others. At the end of the day, I want to provide families with portraits that they are proud to hang on their walls - portraits that capture emotion and feeling. Every bride has an artistic vision for their wedding - whether big or small. I want to frame their vision and memorialize it for years to come. Over the years, I have collected a wealth of information on weddings and the wedding planning process. This catalog is my attempt at sharing that advice.

- Donald Sexton



EDITORIAL

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Save Yourself From "Bridal Remorse"

We've all been there. You spend countless hours researching a product or location - pouring over Google reviews and Facebook groups - to find the "perfect fit." You finally get what you've purchased and it's a complete let-down. A massive disappointment. A one star-review in the making.....

The last thing a bride wants on her wedding day is to be experiencing "bridal remorse" - deep regret over bridal purchases or commitments. No one wants to look back at their Instagram pictures and think, "Why?! If I had only....." You fill in the blank. Thankfully, there is a way to avoid bridal remorse when it comes to hiring a quality photographer. Here are five things to look for before signing a contract:

Solid Portfolio

The number one way to separate quality and experienced photographers from the rest? A solid portfolio. Anyone with a large personality and camera can present as a "good" photographer, but it takes knowledge and experience to develop a strong portfolio. Avoid getting caught up in stylistic details and focus on the image quality: proper exposure, appropriate lighting, diversified posing/staging, and clean editing choices.

A "Face" to the Name

Many brides unknowingly sign a contract with a larger company, not realizing that they have an assortment of contracted photographers of various skill-levels and experience. It's a "grab bag" or a photographer's lottery; you get who is available for your day. To avoid this mistake, ensure you know who - specifically - will be taking your photos. Don't be afraid to inquire about their level of experience (number of years working, volume of weddings completed, and size/location of such weddings).

"Vendorships"

Little known fact: Local wedding vendors often know and develop solid relationships with other local wedding vendors. It makes sense, right? If you run in the same circles frequently enough, you are bound to develop friendships with others in the industry. These vendor relationships can often be a sign of experience and more importantly - consistency. Only a photographer with a consistent presence, in their given area, would likely have forged such relationships. They also can serve as great "references" and resources for other wedding needs.

Quick response time

Nothing is more annoying than being "ghosted" by the person you've paid to assist with your wedding. I've personally photographed at weddings - on short notice - because the bride horrifically discovered her photographer was a "no show" or had cut off all communication leading up to the wedding. Don't be that bride. If a photographer is not responding to messages/emails/texts in a reasonable time, than it could be a sign that they might not be reliable when you need them later. What's reasonable? No more than 48 hours.

A Strong - and Diverse - Social Media Presence

In the age of "social media," most of a photographer's portfolio and social media pages are free and available online. And while it only takes a few minutes to set up an account, it takes years to develop a strong and diverse social media presence. Look for a diverse presence on the web. So they have a Facebook page? Do they have any other web accounts? Instagram? Pinterest? Tik Tok? Website? More importantly, what is the age of these accounts? How long have they been posting content? This often correlates with the age of the photography business. •

The One Thing No One Tells You About Beach Weddings.

The sun setting gently in the distance. The sand sifting through your toes. The waves crashing slowly against the shore. These are the images that often come to mind when brides and grooms daydream of a beach wedding. And while there is a mystical sort of romanticism about the beach, there is also a harsh reality: nature. Thankfully, there are ways to prepare for nature and it's challenges. Here are a few things to consider when planning your dream beach wedding:

Wind

Ironically, when one daydreams of the beach, they frequently leave out the gusts of wind - which are dramatically higher around water than other wedding settings. Brides, who have spent hours on their hair, and members of the wedding party, who have spent weeks preparing the DIY arch and wedding drapery, may be disappointed to find their hard work ripped away in a matter of minutes. However, there is a way to lessen the damage done by preparing ahead of time. Careful consideration should be given to all hair styles, clothing, and wedding decor. If it cannot withstand a small fan, it will not survive high wind speeds. This leads brides/grooms to more practical choices when it comes to appearance. For females, consider long curls/waves that will appear effortless in a heavy breeze or wind; braids also tend to withstand higher gusts and can keep your hair out of the way during critical points in the ceremony. Dresses should be able to flow gracefully in the wind - the longer the better - unless you are willing to risk a wardrobe malfunction. Wedding decor should be securely fastened to heavier objects to prevent any drifting or blowing. In Tampa, wind speeds are higher in the fall and winter, so consideration should also be given to the time of year.

Water

Although it would appear obvious, many brides/grooms fail to factor in water when planning their beach wedding. Those romantic strolls down the beach in your dress and tux can become cumbersome if not planned appropriately. Again, attention should be given to the type of apparel, especially if you intend on getting in the water for some intimate photos at the end of the ceremony. For brides, this would mean choosing a flowy gown over a form-fitting wedding dress. The dress will move better in the water and, when dampened from walking on the beach, will still appear elegant. For grooms, consider shorts or pants that can roll up.

Beach sand & debris

Thought should also be given to the sand and debris beneath your feet. Although the sand will appear beautiful and clean in photos, the reality is that sand collects a variety of other debris with it - including buried trash, seaweed, shells, and small live animals (such as crabs). Whatever is at the bottom of your dress or pants will become a collector or net of sorts for anything you would encounter in the sand. In that regard, lace should be avoided, as it often becomes snagged or snarled in objects found on the beach. Satin or chiffon tend to fend better in the beach conditions than fabrics such as tulle or organza. You should also consider that the beach itself collects dirt which can and often will discolor the bottom of your garments.

sand. wind. water.

Direct Sun

Depending on the time of your wedding, the sun may become a hindrance to guests and the photographer. The beach often lacks any viable shade or covering, unless you are bringing a tent or canopy. Chairs and other decor should be placed strategically to capture the best lighting. In the evening hours, they should be angled to face the sunset (in order to capture the beauty in photos). During the day, chairs and decor should be angled away from direct sunlight to avoid blinding your guests during the ceremony. If you are local, keep in mind that the Gulf is only able to get sunset views; the Atlantic coast will only be able to get sunrise.

Uninvited Guests

The majority of beach weddings occur on public beaches. In that regard, you should consider that the beach will be open to the general public and you may have some gawking guests, scantily clad, in near vicinity. You also may find some unwanted guests in the form of seagulls and other pesty birds. To limit the amount of uninvited guests, brides and grooms should preemptively select the best location by visiting the beach during their planned day and time. Look for areas of the beach that are less frequented - often they are further away from the entrance and may contain more natural elements (such as rocks or trees). Pay close attention to the amount of birds and other animals that may also appear at your ceremony.

Overall, beach weddings are romantic and intimate in nature. Although there are challenges to consider, the overall outcome outweighs any issues that might arise. Careful planning can help brides/grooms avoid many of these issues. Also, consider hiring a beach wedding service, as they are often more experienced with the local beaches and know what to avoid.





Knotted Roots on the Lake

Location: Land 'O Lakes, FL
Price Range: \$4600 +

Strengths: There is nothing more romantic than a sunset wedding set against a wooded lake. Not only is the venue beautiful, it's also practical in that it offers a site for both the ceremony and reception, as well as separate areas for the bride and groom to get ready. As Knotted Roots is an all-inclusive venue, it also makes the planning process easier, as the couple is able to choose from a variety of preferred vendors (myself included), who have been vetted specifically for their individual skills/abilities.

Unique Offerings: Separate bride/groom suite (mentioned above); a private dock (perfect for photos); parking specifically for the venue; partnership with skilled vendors; wedding coordinators.

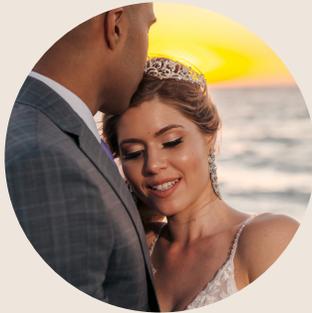


Philippe Park

Location: Safety Harbor, FL
Price Range: \$150 +

Strengths: I frequently utilize Philippe Park for engagement photos, in addition to weddings. The park is draped in luscious trees and overhanging branches, in addition to neighboring the Gulf. This provides a variety of backgrounds for the ceremony and photos. Although open to the public, it never appears to be overly crowded (as opposed to some beach locations) and offers a variety of pavilions for use.

Unique Offerings: brick pathways (handicap accessible); oak trees; historic landmark; 122 acres (one of the larger locations on this list).



Indian Rocks Beach

Location: Indian Rocks Beach, FL
Price Range: Free (for the venue)

Strengths: A public permit is not required for groups under 50, thereby making it one of the more affordable options on this list. Although it is a public beach, it is large in size, consisting of 27 public beach accesses/parks. The beaches are well-maintained, and due to its large size, there is the appearance of fewer beach-goers, as visitors are more spread out. Overall, I have been able to capture many beautiful sunset weddings on the Gulf, leading to cherished memories and photos.

Unique Offerings: budget-friendly; positioned next to a variety of hotels and restaurants; affordable beach parking.



Honeymoon Island

Location: Dunedin, FL
Price Range: \$699+

Strengths: Honeymoon Island was one of the first beaches my wife and I fell in love with when we moved to Florida. It has the feeling of seclusion and privacy with all of the luxuries of a state park. Consisting of more than four miles of beach, Honeymoon Island is a paradise of white sand, gentle waves, and natural beach foliage. It is also well-maintained, as it is a State Park, and has fully assessable facilities and pavilions.

Unique Offerings: rock formations (perfect for photos and backdrops); wedding packages available (starting at \$699); casual beach fare.

The Ultimate Guide to Tampa Bay Wedding and Elopement Venues

Venues for everyone



Romantic & Intimate

Clockwise from Left to Right: IKnotted Roots on the Lake, Phillippe Park



5 Reasons Every Bride Should Have a First Look

The "first look" in wedding lingo refers to the moment when an individual - more commonly the groom (but technically could be anyone) - sees the bride for the first time. For many brides, it is the moment they dream of - a tearful groom, an emotional father, or a roomful of bridesmaids gushing over the dress. Here are five reasons every bride should schedule the "first look" before the wedding ceremony:

Gives you more time to enjoy the wedding and the guests.

If a couple opts out of seeing each other before the ceremony, it severely limits the amount of photos that can be taken. The bride and groom cannot be in the same space (or near the same space, to avoid accidental glances), resulting in mostly bride/bridesmaid, groom/groomsman, and immediate family photos. This also means that the majority of the photography will occur shortly after the ceremony, taking away time that could be spent at the reception or with your wedding guests.

Relieves anxiety

As a photographer, I have watched countless brides and grooms wait in agony for the ceremony to start. The nerves build, tension rises, and everyone is on edge waiting. Why? For tradition's sake. In contrast, I have observed couples who have chosen to have a "first look" before the ceremony and I have seen the visible relief and joy they share when they are together - taking on their biggest day together.

Accounts for variation in daylight and weather.

Couples that choose to wait until after the ceremony to see each other typically have a limited amount of daylight hours to take photos. Ceremonies frequently are scheduled closer to the evening to avoid the "hot" weather and allow guests to arrive timely. This, however, limits the amount of time leftover for individuals to take photos. In addition, if the weather is spotty or calling for rain, the couple may only have a limited window to take photos outside and it might not fit the bride's schedule. Having more time to get pictures before the ceremony, ultimately, allows for an increased amount of daylight hours and time for any inclement weather to "blow over."

Allows for the photographer to capture more than one "first look"

The average bride takes approximately one minute to walk down an aisle (depending on the length of the aisle). During that time, the bride has one (maybe two photographers) who are in a frenzy attempting to get as many photos of the bride, groom, and guests as possible, hoping to capture their individual reactions to the bride. If the bride chooses to complete a "first look" before the wedding, chances are they will receive more quality photos of everyone's reactions. Keep in mind that there are many ways to have a "first look" - some of the photos featured in this article include reactions from bridesmaids, fathers, and grooms. The more, the merrier. This way the bride can look back on each of their individual reactions for years to come.

Creates a private, intimate moment

There is nothing more nerve-racking than walking down an aisle with all eyes trained on you. In fact, for some, it takes away the romance of the moment and they are unable to remember anything - including their spouse - other than the fear of tripping over their own two feet. By having your first look before the ceremony, the couple is able to enjoy each other's "first look" without the prying eyes of those in attendance. It's a moment just between them (and the photographer).



An Audience of One





*Or a group of
trusted friends*



"There are many ways to have a "first look".... including reactions from bridesmaids, fathers, and grooms."

Leave it to the Pros

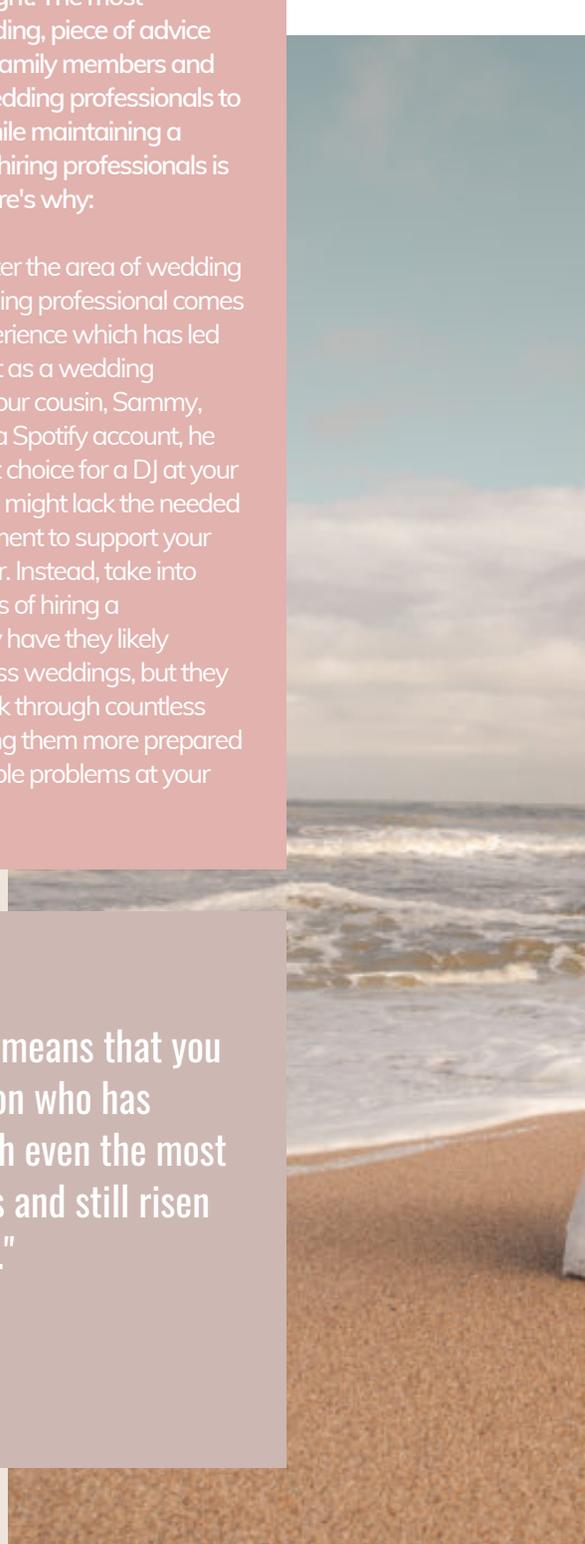
Shortly after you announce your engagement, everyone - including extended family and friends - wants to provide helpful tips and advice on wedding planning. Suddenly, even your Cousin Mildred is a wedding planning professional with a wealth of experience and knowledge. After all, she planned her own wedding in 1994, right? And while there is value in listening from other people's experiences and mistakes, there is a common thread of advice that I have to say I sorely disagree with. Not because I have a personal vendetta or issue, but because I have personally witnessed couples disappointed and frustrated with the outcome.

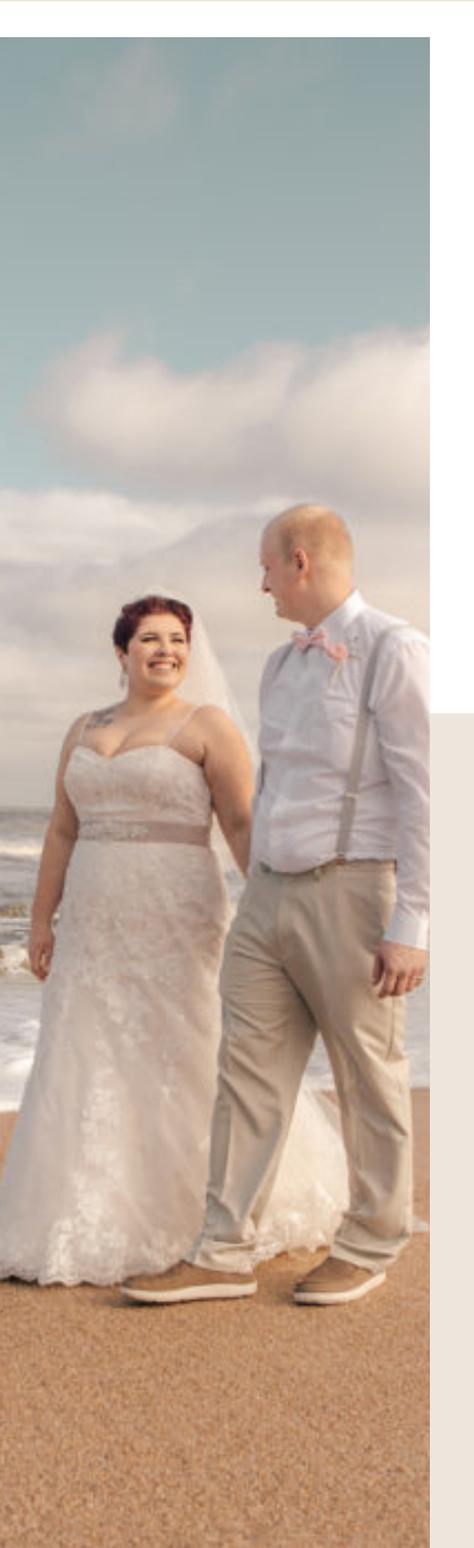
What's the advice? Save money and have ___ (insert your favorite family member, friend, neighbor, grocery clerk, etc.) do your wedding..

Yep, you heard me right. The most common, but misleading, piece of advice provided is to utilize family members and friends in place of wedding professionals to save money. And while maintaining a budget is important, hiring professionals is just as important. Here's why:

Experience - No matter the area of wedding expertise, each wedding professional comes with a wealth of experience which has led to their establishment as a wedding professional. While your cousin, Sammy, has a computer and a Spotify account, he might not be the right choice for a DJ at your wedding - one which might lack the needed WIFI or stereo equipment to support your budding entrepreneur. Instead, take into consideration the pros of hiring a professional. Not only have they likely performed at countless weddings, but they have also had to work through countless issues/barriers, making them more prepared to address any possible problems at your own wedding.

"Hiring a professional means that you are hiring a person who has troubleshooted through even the most challenging scenarios and still risen above...."





The #1 Mistake Brides Make in the Wedding Planning Process

Cousin Sammy might put on some great living room parties but be paralyzed at addressing technical issues at a traditional venue (with limited technology and support). Hiring a professional means that you are hiring a person who has troubleshooted through even the most challenging scenarios and still risen above and continued a successful business.

Quality of Product/Service - Yes, your grandmother can make a mean peanut butter cookie, but this doesn't necessarily translate to a three-tiered wedding cake. And while grandma might be able to pull off a basic tier or two, is that really what you want? You only get to do your wedding once and, when you look back at your photos with your future grandchildren, you will likely not be sharing a budget analysis, but rather the beauty of your wedding and all of the intricate details. Sure, include grandma in the process (maybe even enlist her help in making great cookie favors), but avoid cutting costs on important wedding details, where the quality of the product and service is necessary.

Familiarity with other Vendors/Venues - Often overlooked, wedding professionals often develop relationships with other wedding professionals. This is a natural benefit to the bride, as it creates an ease of communication and an understanding of the other's expectations and work style. Photographers learn quickly how to navigate taking beautiful photos without impeding the work of make-up artists, officiants, and DJs. Florists learn how to compliment a cake designer's creation and work simultaneously to develop a beautiful product. This might not come as naturally to someone who does not regularly work in the wedding industry.

At the end of the day, save money, but learn to cut costs in the right way. A two-tiered cake from a professional might be more desirable than a three-tiered cake from your aunt's neighbor. Four hours of professional photography might be more valuable than eight hours of your uncle's attempt behind the camera. Don't be afraid to incorporate your loved ones in the process but leave the important details to individuals who have made weddings their livelihood - they have more at stake, and naturally want your wedding to succeed.

The Ultimate Guide to Wedding Dresses

What to look for and where to look

It's the center of every bride's vision board. The highlight of every photo. The focal point of the overall style and mood of the wedding. It's THE DRESS. For many brides, picking the wedding dress is one of the most crucial decisions made during the wedding planning process. After all, how a bride feels in her wedding attire makes a huge difference on how she will feel during the big day. Entire TV shows and bridal catalogs have been devoted to this one wedding element and, with it, comes a certain kind of weight - an importance - to selecting the perfect one. For some, it can even bring a sense of anxiety and uncertainty. Wedding dresses do require careful selection, and for that reason, I have compiled a few considerations in the dress selection process.

WHO?

The obvious answer is the bride. Wedding dresses are solely associated with the bride (and maybe her bride-to-be). However, a more subtle question should be: who is the bride? As in, how might you utilize your dress selection to best represent your personality and overall style? The dress should simply be a more elegant or elevated version of you - the bride. This is the piece that many brides get wrong. They go looking for a dress that fits their "vision" or their "wedding board" instead of looking for a dress that fits them. The dress should be secondary to the bride. If the dress is becoming the center of attention, then it, by definition, is taking the attention away from the bride, herself.



*The dress should
be secondary to
the bride*

WHEN?

Approximately nine months from the big day. Keep in mind that many wedding dresses require alterations to ensure a proper and perfect fit. Not to mention, some dresses require multiple fittings.

WHAT?

There are several elements to picking your perfect dress, but ultimately you want to look for the right SHAPE (Silhouette, Hemline, Appearance (overall), Personality, and Embellishments). Silhouette refers to the overall shape or structure of the dress. The most common silhouettes seen in bridal fashion today include the ballgown, mermaid, sheath, a-line, trumpet, and empire. The name of the silhouette often is a visual picture of the dress itself. For instance, a mermaid silhouette has a mermaid-like appearance, with a fitted bodice and a dramatic flare at or below the knee.

The hemline refers to the length of the dress - do you plan to wear a short, cocktail inspired dress or a long dramatic gown with a flowing train? Both of these factors have an impact on the overall appearance - or style - that the dress emulates (such as modern, romantic, or boho). The dress should also fit your personality and, as noted before, be a more elevated version of your everyday style and fashion. If you typically wear more modern and sophisticated pieces, now might not be the time to try out a boho-chic vibe. The embellishments are really just the icing on the cake - beading, lace accents, etc. - that provide extra flare to the overall dress. Ultimately, all of these elements when properly placed together (the "SHAPE") should create an ideal dress.



Shape your dress

Q&A

Q: When is the right time to book a wedding photographer?

A: About a year in advance. Photographers book weddings on a first come, first serve basis. If you wait too long to reach out to a photographer, there is a good chance they have already been booked by another bride - especially if you choose a highly sought after date (such as a weekend, a date near a holiday, or a date with numeral significance - 2/2/22). Booking your photographer earlier also allows for more frequent communication with the photographer during the planning process. Want to set off fireworks but are unsure how it would be best captured in photos? Having your photographer booked and ready will allow for a more certain answer. Also, in the same regard, the more time you spend communicating with your photographer, the more comfortable you will be with them on your Big Day. After all, your photographer is the vendor that you will see the most and spend the most time with. Added bonus - wedding photographers often are willing to take engagement photos as well; saving you the trouble of having to track down two different trusted professionals!



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