



The Surprise Wedding

Some couples don't tell friends and relatives that they're getting married until they show up for the nuptials. (Some don't even tell each other!) Is this the key to an unforgettable event, or a recipe for disaster? Couples and planners spill the beans. *by Jodi Helmer*

IMAGINE RECEIVING A BOUQUET AT WORK from your boyfriend with a card that reads, "Meet me in Paris." Imagine your coworker, on cue, then handing you an envelope with airline tickets and a boyfriend-penned note with talk of a surprise, a suggestion to pack light and this kicker: "Don't worry, I've talked to your boss. You've been cleared for the next three weeks."

This actually happened—to Lisa Gill, of New York City. When she arrived in Paris, her boyfriend of seven years, Wil, proposed. Lisa wasn't surprised by that, given the elaborate plans he'd made to get her there. But she was floored when Wil took her to a restaurant where 40 of their loved ones awaited them. That's when Wil revealed that they'd be getting married a few days later. "Walking into the restaurant

was the biggest emotional moment for me," Lisa recalls. "I couldn't quite piece together why everyone was there. The thought never crossed my mind that they'd be there for my wedding; it was the thing I would imagine the least."

We know what you're thinking (besides, perhaps, "I would've killed him!"): Who chooses this kind of wedding? But a growing number of couples are tossing aside tradition and surprising their guests—and sometimes each other—with on-the-spot nuptials. Comedian Steve Martin and his new bride, Anne Stringfield, are the latest celeb couple to do it; see "How the Stars Pull It Off" on page 233 for others. Surprise weddings, often disguised as cocktail parties or birthday bashes, are popular among couples who want a truly unique wedding and thrive on the challenge of keeping the biggest day of their lives a complete secret. "Plan-

ning a surprise wedding is not for the faint of heart," says Patty Sachs, a Minneapolis-based wedding coordinator who has worked on surprise events. Emily Kalnicky and Seth Price of Logan, UT, barely slept the night before their surprise wedding. "We worried about all the things that could go wrong, like the judge showing up too early and blowing the surprise," Emily says.

But everything went according to plan. One month after they first hatched the idea, the couple had invited 35 guests to Seth's parents' home, ostensibly to celebrate their graduation from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. During a slideshow that the couple had prepared, Emily slipped out of the room and changed into her wedding dress. A few minutes later, Seth showed a slide of the couple on their camping trip and Emily showing off her engagement ring (she hadn't worn it since the proposal). There was an audible gasp, then Seth surprised them again by saying, "We are getting married today, and the wedding will be starting in a few minutes."

Guests burst into applause—and then their eyes darted around the room to figure out who else was in on the secret. After a few minutes of frantic chatter, it was clear to all that no one had known about the wedding. "My dad thought that people forgot to tell him that there was going to be a wedding," Seth recalls. "In the video, you can hear him asking Emily's mom, my cousin and my uncle, 'Did you know about this?'" Meanwhile, "people were hugging us and rushing up to congratulate our families," says Emily.

This part is often the highlight for the couple. "The reaction from our guests was amazing," says Sarah Champion, who married Kevin Freitas in a surprise wedding in Stevenson, WA. "Everyone was so surprised and excited and supportive; that moment made it all worth it." But "it was a lot of work," she adds. "On a few occasions during the planning process, we almost ran into friends and family, which would have completely blown our cover."

Sarah and Kevin also feared that staffers at their wedding site would give them away. "Kevin's mom was helping coordinate an event for her job at our venue a couple of months before our wedding," Sarah explains, "and we were worried that an employee might notice her last name and ask if she was related to the Kevin Freitas getting married in January. We called our site a couple of times to make sure that no one would say anything about our plans." And yet, the bride says, all the stress was worth it: "Nothing beats the adrenaline rush of trying to pull together plans without anyone noticing."

Another source of stress for couples who want a surprise wedding is that there's an increased chance that guests won't attend the event. This was Sarah's fear; she'd remembered how her sister-in-law missed her friend's surprise wedding because she'd been told it was a birthday party, and she'd had other plans. In the end, Sarah and Kevin decided it was worth taking the chance. (As it turned out, the only guests missing were those who'd gotten caught in a sudden blizzard.) And, of course, couples who host a surprise wedding don't get to share the excitement of planning the event with their families and friends. It's common for couples who host surprise weddings to also hold formal receptions at a later date, or to come up with creative ways to share their wedding day, such as sending DVDs of the event.

The bottom line, say brides, is that the advantages of having a surprise wedding outweigh the challenges. "It was the element that set my wedding apart," says Lauren Thompson of Houston, who surprised her boyfriend with a wedding in Las Vegas. "It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and it'll be a great story to tell our grandkids." And there's another benefit, according to Emily: "After our wedding, a friend told me that any couple who works together well enough to pull off a surprise wedding will have a long and happy marriage."

Jodi Helmer lives in Charlotte, NC.

How the Stars Pull It Off

It's no shock that celebrities go for secret nuptials: The more famous they are, the more difficult it is for them to have a private affair. Hence these sneaky moves:

Sandra Bullock & Jesse James

THE PREMISE: The invitation was for a barbecue "in honor of Sandy B. given with love by Jesse J."

THE BIG REVEAL: The couple showed a 10-minute video that ended with James announcing, "We've been engaged since October, suckers!" They then proceeded with their ceremony.

Britney Spears & Kevin Federline

THE PREMISE: Though their wedding was set for October, they invited 27 relatives and friends to a private home the month before for an "engagement party."

THE BIG REVEAL: Upon arriving at the wedding site, guests were handed invitations that read "Surprise! It is with much love that we welcome you to our wedding ceremony tonight."

Jennifer Lopez & Marc Anthony

THE PREMISE: Approximately 35 relatives and close friends were invited by phone to Lopez's Beverly Hills mansion for what was described as an "afternoon party."

THE BIG REVEAL: Once everyone arrived, Anthony announced that their wedding ceremony was about to take place.

Megan Mullally & Nick Offerman

THE PREMISE: Mullally invited guests to her Los Angeles home for a dinner party on the night before the Emmy (she'd been nominated). "We lied to everybody," Mullally has said. "We lied to the caterer... we lied, lied, lied, lied."

THE BIG REVEAL: When guests arrived, the couple said, "Welcome to our wedding!" and then held the ceremony and reception in the backyard.

Julia Roberts & Danny Moder

THE PREMISE: The couple invited guests to "celebrate Independence Day" on July 3 at Roberts' ranch in Taos, NM.

THE BIG REVEAL: When the party started to wind down—close to midnight—Roberts urged guests to stick around a little longer. She and Moder stepped under an archway, he proposed, and their 20-minute ceremony began.