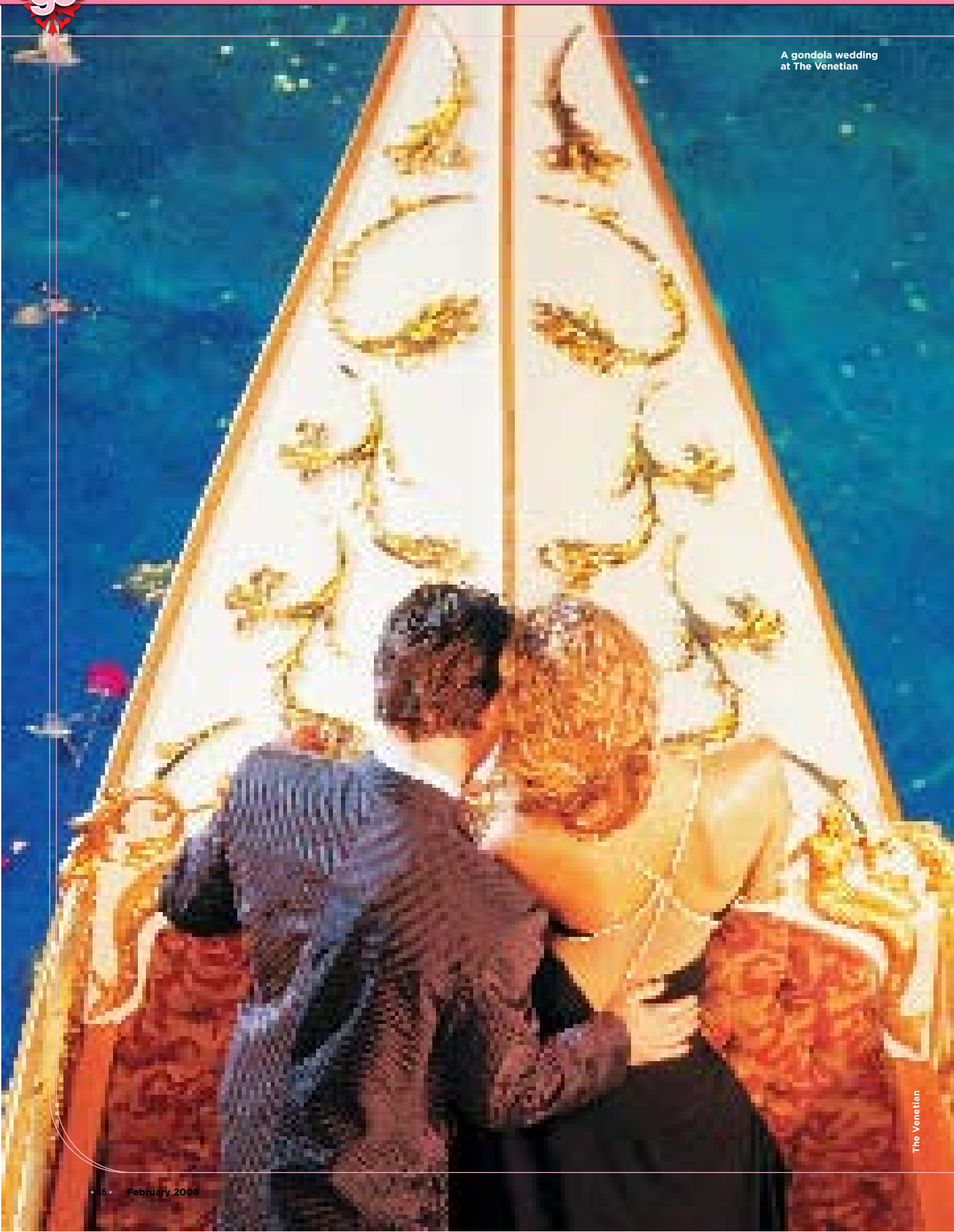




A gondola wedding at The Venetian



The Venetian

Take a Wow



By Tony Ware

GETTING MARRIED IN LAS VEGAS ISN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE. (READ: ELVIS IMPERSONATORS IN A CHEESY CHAPEL.) TODAY, LAVISH AND UPSCALE CEREMONIES ARE ON THE RISE IN SIN CITY.

For years, Las Vegas and the quickie wedding have been a match made in heaven. Ceremonies in Venice, Paris, New York City, Camelot, in the Chapel in the Clouds (atop the Stratosphere), on a pirate ship or aboard the Starship Enterprise have been just a few of the potential backdrops over the years, as themed casinos and weddings have always

been a part of the city's intrigue.

Though drive-through weddings and whirlwind celebrity annulments still exist (not to mention Circus Circus clown-officiated midway weddings and nuptials in front of the "Welcome to Las Vegas" sign, among other spur-of-the-moment ceremonies), Las Vegas has made great leaps in changing its overall image to one of luxury.



"Initially, you mention a Vegas wedding and the first thought that comes to mind is a bad Elvis impersonator, a cheesy chapel and some fake flowers," says Andrea Eppolito, director of catering and special events at BOA Steakhouse and Sushi Roku in the Caesars Forum Shops. "But more and more, that image is changing."

With no blood test and no waiting period required for marriage licenses (which cost \$55 cash), plus license bureaus open until midnight and enough chapels that they almost compete with slot machines, Las Vegas has long offered visitors an opportunity to gamble on happiness, whether for a weekend or a lifetime.

Celebrities from Frank Sinatra and Judy Garland to Angelina Jolie and Bruce Willis have taken vows within the city limits—and many others have followed. Indeed, recent data shows that almost 150,000 people get married in Vegas annually (which equals almost six percent of the nation's nuptials).

But couples who want to tie the knot in the Las Vegas of the new millennium are thinking beyond a quickie ceremony to a marriage of sensibilities—and a number of refined spaces and four- and five-star restaurants are allowing for plush frills rather than cheap thrills.

"The entire vision of Las Vegas as a destination has changed tremendously, especially over the last 10 years," says Eppolito, a 13-year veteran of event planning. "The opening of the Bellagio [in 1998] forced the world to sit up and take notice of the city as a luxury location. Marble flooring, world-renowned artwork, award-winning chefs, imported linens... the public began to realize that you could come to Las Vegas for much more than penny slots, and that spilled over into the world of weddings."

Indeed, if you want your wedding to be seen in the right light, showcasing glitz rather than chintz, the honeyed hues radiating from the Bellagio lobby's hand-blown Chihuly glass ceiling would certainly set the appropriate scene. From the musical fountain show and Grand Terraces to a chapel of silks, damask fabrics and perfumed air (not to mention unobtrusive two-way mirrors and real-time editing of the filming of the ceremony), the Bellagio ushered in the era where attention to detail went way beyond the choice of a red or white bouquet.

Steve Wynn, developer of the Bellagio, continued his tradition of meticulously dedicated services when he opened the \$2.7 billion Wynn Las Vegas in 2005. Since then, Jacqueline Montoya, the Wynn's executive director

of weddings, has coordinated everything from intimate services in suites to those overlooking the 18th hole to an event featuring more than \$70,000 in custom floral décor that was filmed for the Travel Channel.

"Las Vegas has everything all within a five-mile radius... dancing to restaurants from every corner of the world to Broadway," says Montoya. "More importantly, as Wynn Las Vegas functions almost as its own 'city,' the guests really do not need to leave the resort for anything. My team will book the appointments and all they need to do is enjoy."

For example, you can go cuckoo for Coco and get your makeup done at the Chanel boutique. Or, do the bridesmaid shopping at Manolo Blahnik and Roberto Cavalli. (Shop for yourself, too; the short cocktail dress is the new wedding gown; traditional isn't out, but nontraditional is in.) Brides can register at numerous stores, such as the Las Vegas-based internet retailer Unica Home, says Melinda Sheckells, editor at *Las Vegas Home & Design* and an advocate for design-forward

planning. The bridal party can partake of any spa treatment imaginable and then have a slumber party, while guys can have a golf day. There's a venue for anything—bachelor/bachelorette party, rehearsal dinner and ceremony.

Eppolito has helped realize fantasies of all sorts: A couple renewed their wedding vows surrounded by gondolas, underneath handcrafted willow canopies on the rose pedal-strewn canal in the

Venetian; another couple favored the balcony at BOA, which was made SoHo-sleek with black linens and inky ostrich feathers for a New York couple. More and more, parties are taking advantage of the Las Vegas dining scene and personalizing the menu both for the meal and entertainment. From full dinners to designer hors d'oeuvres, any price point can be met by established or up-and-coming talent, whether the desire is buffet, brasserie or *beaucoup* bucks. Receptions can be customized around rare wines, import sports cars or Cirque du Soleil performers. There are packages from below \$1,000 to more than \$100,000.

Plenty of couples want to avoid the incessant clang of slot machines (easily possible in the secluded Four Seasons, the 50-acre JW Marriott in Summerlin or The Ritz-Carlton, Lake Las Vegas, 17 miles from the Strip). But for every one such couple, there's a pair that wants to shout their love out loud (or maybe just shout over some music).



Lake Las Vegas and Dragon Ridge: Hadley Han of Jason Kenneth Designs; Fountain and terrace: Courtesy of The Venetian



(Clockwise from top) Ceremony on Lake Las Vegas; Fountain and terrace at The Venetian; Dragon Ridge Country Club reception in nearby Henderson, Nevada



WACKY WEDDINGS

In Las Vegas, a little is rarely enough. Here are a few physically challenging ways to take the plunge.

They say marriage is a leap of faith, so why not test that theory with a skydiving or bungee wedding? Select a skydiving preacher and shout "I do" in tandem, if you can. Packages are available through **Las Vegas Extreme Skydiving** (www.vegasesxtremeskydiving.com)

You've been running around your whole life looking for that special someone. Well, there's one place where you can keep moving and settle down at the same time, and that's at the **Las Vegas Marathon Run Through Weddings** (www.run-thru-weddings.com). Each December, couples can commemorate their love for running and each other at the Run Thru Wedding Chapel.

Some couples prefer another type of exercise: swimming. David Heilman and Charlene Jimenez took the plunge, literally, when they held up "I do" signs inside the enormous 117,000-gallon aquarium at **Silverton Casino Lodge** (www.silvertoncasino.com; 866-946-4373). Do you have what it takes to dive into a lifelong relationship? If so, call Kimiko Peterson, the casino's director of advertising and public relations, at 702-263-7777.



BRIDAL BESTS

TIPS FROM THE LAS VEGAS WEDDING CONCIERGE



In addition to resorts and casinos, private estates and country clubs also work with event companies to make opportunities that are as far from kitsch as conceivable. But since elegance can be expensive, and Las Vegas holds so much potential to maximize your fantasies, you need to be careful not to let things spiral out of control. Tracey Kumer-Moore of Your Las Vegas Wedding Concierge divulges some important advice.

“Consider a midweek wedding.

They are easier to come by than the popular choice of a Saturday night, and venues may be more motivated to offer incentives to book. Or, have a luncheon reception, a late night cocktail party or a mid-afternoon tea reception. Lunch receptions cost less than dinners, and, in some venues, some of your favorite menu items are available for lunch at lower cost. Most people will drink less during daytime weddings, as well.”

“Keep your wedding party to a minimum to cut down on wedding party flowers. And find a reception venue that is strong on décor to help minimize your own décor budget.”

“Magazines and publications such as Grace Ormonde Wedding Style and INSIDE Weddings, which have recognized the more luxuriant Las Vegas, are helpful sources. Additionally, resources for brides-to-be are linked throughout Las Vegas Bride.”

“A wedding reception in a nightclub/lounge venue in off-hours can be a great idea, especially since many nightclubs also are restaurants or have catering on site,” says Tracey Kumer-Moore of Your Las Vegas Wedding Concierge, which offers distinctive direction services to couples. “You have built-in décor, built-in dance floors and some of the best A/V equipment around. Some will employ their own DJs who have had wedding experience, or will have stages to bring in live entertainment. They often have tons of plasma TVs or large screens perfect for showing wedding montages or doing live photo booths.” Indeed, venues such as Pure at Caesars Palace or Jet at Mirage offer banquet possibilities, though guests must be 21, depending on the type of liquor license.

For some, a AAA Five-Diamond resort is necessary to match an equally carat-heavy engagement ring. But those who would prefer rocks of the boulder variety can take advantage of the city’s temperate climate.

“The general public doesn’t recognize just how much raw beauty there is around the city,” Eppolito says. “Red Rock and Mount Charleston offer breathtaking mountain backgrounds with wide sweeping views of the city. Lake Mead and Lake Las Vegas are glorious in the evening, offering moonlit cruises and beachside photo opportunities. And for those interested in a piece of Las Vegas history, there is the Neon Museum, featuring



BOA Steakhouse

over 50 years of historical neon signs. It’s a pretty wild backdrop for engagement photos and a unique walking tour opportunity for out-of-town guests.”

In the end, a marriage is about trust. Las Vegas is working hard to instill similar trust in visitors that their wedding memories can be as endearing as they are enduring. ✈

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