

HOW BIG SHOULD YOU GO?

The last really big wedding I went to was mega – in so many ways. The bride's dress that cost 'several thousand pounds'; the packed-to-the-rafters church; the sky-high tablecentres; the hour-long firework display; and, yes, the whopping great big budget.

From the second the save-the-date cards went out, there was a huge sense of anticipation about this wedding. Guests knew it would be grand and stylish, an event at which champagne would flow freely (literally); we'd eat the finest food and party till dawn in the lavishly decorated rooms of an exquisite country house. The day did not disappoint. It was magical and I'll have fond memories of it for years to come.

But none of this is to suggest that smaller weddings are any less wonderful. With a big wedding comes a feeling of formality, a sense of occasion that the couple and their guests need to rise to. There may be more traditions to follow and many guests the couple haven't met before. More intimate weddings, on the other hand, are often all about the 'party' and have a much more relaxed vibe.

A recent wedding I went to was so small that when the bride entered the tiny village church, she said she heard her guests' intake of breath. And when her veil flew off unexpectedly at the altar, we all giggled. We sat within touching distance of her and no one was bothered about something as insignificant as a wardrobe malfunction. The truth is, a small wedding doesn't always carry the same weight of expectation that one with a monster budget will naturally shoulder. And that often means that your guests are surprised at how lovely the day is. – Jade Beer



WHY I WENT SMALL

Writer Grace Timothy, 28, wed Rich Holmes, 27, in June 2010 in Chichester, West Sussex

After my husband proposed, I had a recurring nightmare: I was walking down an endless aisle, with dream-treacle slowing down my legs and a thousand strangers watching every move. I wanted to marry Rich, but the big-wedding fantasy women have from childhood wasn't mine.

I'm not especially shy, but I couldn't bear the idea of seeing a sea of faces I found hard to place – a distant cousin's boyfriend, my dad's former boss, a school friend I hadn't seen in 10 years – bearing witness to such an intimate moment. I've been to huge weddings and wondered: 'Why am I here?' I didn't want that, so our guest list was kept to a neat 65.

Of course, even with a short guest list, the pressure is on to throw a bash that will be remembered. Over →



Grace married Rich in an informal ceremony in her parents' garden

emotions

emotions

the years, I've seen friends and family sweating over every detail to ensure the 'perfect day' – from flying make-up artists to Sardinia for flawless wedding pictures, to commissioning hand-stitched napkins.

What worried me was that many friends incurred a debt the size of a mortgage and their entire being was given over to the whim of a clipboard-wielding wedding planner. The bride wears Vera Wang and a strained smile. The groom isn't where he's meant to be when the doves are released. Rain leads to a mud slide under the marquee. Disappointment seemed inevitable if we tried to beat the meticulously planned extravaganzas we'd witnessed.

So we ran in the opposite direction. We wanted our vows to be personal, not just the script we'd seen played out so many times before, so a church was a no-no. The hotels wanted us to follow an itinerary, mapping our day minute by minute. The only place we felt 'at home' was... at home. Or at my parents' home, to be exact. That everlasting aisle of my nightmares was a quick jaunt through the garden (a walk I'd taken a million times), past just six rows of family and best friends.

When it came to the reception, we kept it simple. High on our list of priorities were wine, cheese and ice cream. So that's what we spent our budget on. Even flowers were an afterthought to placate my mother. I thought the garden had enough, but that was a rite of passage I couldn't deny her.

Of course, waving goodbye to the wedding planner leaves the bridal party in charge. When the caterers fused the electrics, my mother had to sort it out. My husband mixed the cocktails, and I was the one calling taxis into the early hours. But that felt right. It was *our* party, with nobody telling us when to stand, when to smile. Yes, it's the most special day of your life, but what you remember is not how chilled the bubbly was: it's the special feeling you get looking at your friends, family and husband, reflecting your blissed-out state.

VITAL STATS GUEST LIST 65

TOTAL BUDGET Around £7,000, plus contributions and gifts from friends and family including flowers, a dress, a marquee and decorations. **GREATEST INDULGENCE** £340 silk Miu Miu shoes.

GRACE'S DEFINING MOMENT 'Hearing and recognising each distinct, much-loved laugh, sob and cheer when we had our first kiss as husband and wife.'



Deborah and Adam's wedding ceremony was in a synagogue

WHY I WENT BIG

Brides editor Deborah Joseph, 36, married Adam Clyne, 33, in Manchester in December 2005

Three seconds before walking up the aisle on my wedding day, the strap on my shoe broke and, one second after that, I started shaking. The shaking didn't stop until Adam and I had said 'I do' and we'd walked back down the aisle. My poor dad had nail marks in the skin of his hands for days afterwards.

The truth is, I'm not good in crowds, especially when all eyes in that crowd are on me. But that's the situation I found myself in on my wedding day – the focal point of 500 pairs of eyes and with one faulty shoe to boot.

Yes, 500. My name is Deborah Joseph and I had 500 guests at my wedding.

My great-grandfather had 16 children and, as a result, I have an enormous family. I also married the son of a wedding planner who was never going to be happy with the words 'small' and 'wedding' being used in the same sentence. So once we'd satisfied our parents' needs and added 50 friends each, the numbers were Big. And Fat.

I remember lying in bed on my wedding night and thinking: that was an amazing day; the dance floor was packed until 2am; the atmosphere was electric; I was in the privileged position of being able to invite every single person I cared about; we received a ridiculous number of presents that set up our home furnishings for life; and

I was able to show the world – well, my world – how much I love my man.

But I was also glad it was over. There are many downsides to having a huge wedding. Most venues I liked were too small. It took us six months to complete our thank-you cards. There were at least 200 people there that I didn't know (all those second cousins three times removed) and I didn't get to speak to all of those who I did know. It cost an arm and a leg (though having a wedding planner mother-in-law helped on that front). It was nerve-wracking walking up the aisle and I believe the bigger the wedding, the bigger the pre-wedding stress. But if I had my time again, would I change a thing? It was wonderful, so absolutely not. Well, apart from my choice of shoes. **B**



The lavish reception was held at The Midland hotel

VITAL STATS GUEST LIST 500 BUDGET £50,000+ GREATEST INDULGENCE Flying a 10-person band over from Israel. **DEBORAH'S DEFINING MOMENT** 'When the band finished at 2am, the dance floor was still completely packed with everyone shouting, "More!" It was a great feeling.'