

Local Treasures

Your own city or county
can offer amazing
(and amazingly *affordable*)
wedding sites.

By Patricia Kelly
for MagnetStreet Weddings

In “The Wizard of Oz,” Dorothy learned that her heart’s desire lay no farther from home than her own backyard. Today, couples are finding the same to be true of their perfect wedding venue!

From art centers and city halls to beaches and botanical gardens, local spaces are an invaluable resource for couples looking to exchange vows without having to venture far.

Star Quality

Couples who marry at the Genesee Theatre in Waukegan, Illinois, are truly the stars of their own once-in-a-lifetime performance.

Downtown Chicago has theaters with amazing architecture and the old-world feeling, but we have the same thing—for less than half the price.

The Genesee was built in 1927—a luxurious movie palace and theater of Spanish Renaissance design. Sixty years later, the coming of the modern movie cineplex contributed to its decline, and it closed its doors in 1989. After 20 years of standing vacant, the Genesee was purchased by the City of Waukegan, and more than 120 city volunteers restored it to its former glory.

“A lot of our brides say they just don’t see themselves in a traditional venue,” says Special Events Manager Fay Ander. “Some grew up doing theater, and this is their dream location. But we also get many couples who just love the fact that we can do anything they want here.”



Genesee Theatre
Photo Courtesy of Welsh Studios

Smaller weddings often take place in the Grand Lobby, where the bride sweeps down the original marble staircase to join her groom beneath the glittering, 18-foot Baccarat crystal chandelier. The reception area is on the second floor, where guests also have access to the rooftop patio on top of the marquee.



Genesee Theatre
Photo Courtesy of Superstar Memories

Couples who choose the Stage Wedding package have full use of the theater's sound, lighting, and rigging systems, as well as the design staff. Brides and grooms stand on the 4,600-square-foot stage, before a black or burgundy curtain, and exchange their vows as their guests look on from the best seats in the house. Cocktails are served in the Grand Lobby, after which the guests are ushered back into the theater to watch the couple's romantic video on the silver screen. Once the applause dies down, the screen lifts to reveal the glittering reception on stage.



Genesee Theatre
Photo Courtesy of Welsh Studios

"It is a production!" says Ander with a laugh. "But we can also do more casual weddings, right down to disposable plates and linens. You know, downtown Chicago has theaters with amazing, beautiful architecture and the old-world feeling, but we have the same thing—for less than half the price."

Picture Perfect

Built by the city of Tempe, Arizona, in 2007, the striking Tempe Center for the Arts is the perfect wedding spot for lovers of art, architecture, sunshine, and style. "Our greatest special feature is our beautiful infinity-edge reflecting pool," says Kathleen Dooner, TCA's production coordinator. Couples say their vows in the magnificent lobby, standing before floor-to-ceiling windows and a breathtaking view of the pool's 300-foot waterfall cascading to Tempe Town Lake, with the Papago and Camelback Mountains rising in the distance.

There are so many different looks and feels within the Center—it works for every style and financial situation.

Treasure Hunt Tips

Finding the perfect wedding venue is easier than you think ... and the search is half the fun!

Start by exploring your local visitors bureau website.

In Fairfax County, Virginia, bridal couples take advantage of Visit Fairfax, the county's official tourism site.

"We're a great resource because we have a database full of great wedding locations—and we're a free service as well," says Trevor Curtis, Destination Sales/Service Specialist. Curtis connects couples with a wide range of venues, including many beautifully restored historic properties that capture the flavor of Virginia's past.

"A lot of people think of this area as very urban, but we have all of these parks and historic homes and estates—hidden gems that make you feel like you're in the country when you're only 15 minutes away from downtown Washington, D.C.," Curtis says. "And they're a lot more cost-effective than a hotel ballroom because they're city- or county-owned."



Clark House
Photo Courtesy of Don Sweeney, Fairfax County Park Authority

Depending on their taste and wedding size, couples can also choose from a variety of other sites: the rooftop terrace with views of downtown Tempe and Phoenix; the 200-seat studio theater; an outdoor sculpture garden; and the indoor art gallery.

“We’re more affordable than most spaces, and you can do everything right here: rehearsal dinner, ceremony, cocktails and reception,” says Mary Fowler, TCA’s management assistant. “We’ve had elegant weddings, casual weddings, artsy weddings—from \$5,000 wedding cakes to tiny little Ding Dong cupcakes! There are so many different looks and feels within the Center—it works for every style and financial situation.”

Can’t Beat City Hall

If you think of city hall weddings as quick nuptials before a sleepy judge in a stuffy room, think again. “Couples come in, look up at the ceiling, and just say ‘Wow,’” says Tracey McLaughlin, Event Coordinator at the Minneapolis City Hall and Hennepin County Courthouse. “Our brides and grooms are definitely looking for that wow factor.”

A National Historic Landmark, the Minneapolis City Hall building was constructed from 1887 to 1906. Its grand Richardsonian Romanesque architecture, five-story Rotunda, stained glass windows, and sweeping marble staircase make it the perfect site for an elegant wedding.



Minneapolis City Hall and Hennepin County Courthouse
Photo Courtesy of Municipal Building Commission

“All brides come down the staircase,” says McLaughlin. “It’s quite the entrance! Photographers love the building because of the wonderful details: the stained glass windows, the marble, the beautiful ironwork, and the vintage elevators.”

Contact your city or county park district.

Three Rivers Park District in Hennepin County, Minnesota, offers a variety of indoor and outdoor sites—from ski chalets and farms to lakeside pavilions and gardens.

Grand old cities like Chicago have a wealth of beautiful—and often historic—properties to choose from. Check out the Chicago Park District’s website, and you’ll be amazed at the variety: grand ballrooms at the South Shore Cultural Center; the lush Garfield Park Conservator; the quaint Promontory Park building (site of the 1933-34 World’s Fair); the Humboldt Park Field House and Boat House; and many more. You can even make a splash at the iconic Buckingham Fountain—saying “I do” between shimmering Lake Michigan and the vibrant Chicago skyline.



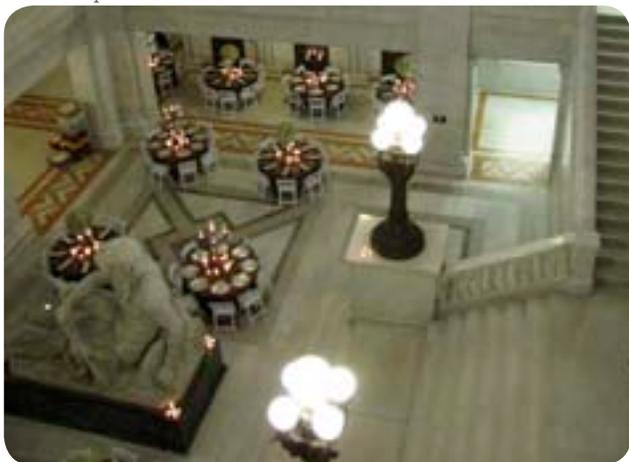
Wakefield Chapel
Photo Courtesy of Don Sweeney, Fairfax County Park Authority

Discover the city that has your dream venue.

From buzzing capitols to quaint suburbs, each city has its charms—and secret gems for wedding venues. You can get married at the historic Union Station in Kansas City, tie the knot in Vanderbilt Hall at New York City’s Grand Central Terminal, or take advantage of the wedding package at San Francisco’s spectacular City Hall. The city of Savannah, Georgia, has even created a website exclusively dedicated to local venues for brides and grooms.

And don’t forget—small towns can be beautiful, too. For example, the town of St. Peters, Missouri—population 53,000—rents a charming gazebo in its City Centre Park for less than \$200.

Couples say their vows at the foot of the grand marble staircase, directly in front of the Father of Waters statue—a grand old gentleman who represents the Mississippi River. “People either love him or hate him,” says McLaughlin with a laugh. “They think of him as a beautiful piece of art—or a big thing in the way! He has been decorated with flowers ... and worn a top hat ... and a bowtie. Once the room is filled with tables and guests, he just becomes a fun conversation piece.”



Minneapolis City Hall and Hennepin County Courthouse
Photo Courtesy of Municipal Building Commission

McLaughlin says that City Hall is especially affordable because it requires no decorations other than centerpieces for the tables. “The carved marble and architecture is so beautiful—decorations can actually take away from the space,” she says. “It’s a completely unique venue ... there isn’t anything else like it in the Twin Cities.”

Island Magic

In 1886, a group of millionaires—including the Rockefellers, Morgans, and Pulitzers—purchased Jekyll Island, Georgia, and made it their exclusive winter vacation retreat. For more than half a century, it remained the private playground of America’s leading families, who called themselves the Jekyll Island Club.

Today, the island is a self-funded state park—and a wedding hotspot for couples with budgets large and small. “People from all over the South come here for their weddings,” says Anna Hall, Communications Specialist at the Jekyll Island Authority. The free-and-easy spirit of the island’s wealthy heyday is alive and well as wedding parties clad in their finery take a ride around the island on the historic trolleys, and couples often rent vintage cars to make their getaway.

The historic Faith Chapel, built in 1904, is a romantic, Gothic Revival setting, perfect for moderate budgets, while the Jekyll Island Club Hotel brings the Gilded Age back to life in its ballroom and other, more intimate spaces. The new beachfront Convention Center is Hall’s favorite venue, with its hardwood floors, pine ceilings, and huge windows that showcase the sun setting over the ocean. “You can have your beach wedding, without the sand and the wind,” she says with a laugh.

My favorite question from brides is ‘How much does it cost to get married on Driftwood Beach?’ because I get to answer, ‘It’s free!’

Of course, brides and grooms who want to get married on the beach are not deterred by Mother Nature. Hall reports that the most popular wedding venues are Jekyll Island’s beaches, particularly Driftwood Beach on the island’s north end, where immense, gnarled tree roots create beautiful sculptures on the sand and picturesque backdrops for wedding photos.

“The colors of the bridesmaids’ dresses really stand out against the white sand and the gray driftwood,” says Hall. “And brides will wade into the ocean, play in the sand, climb up into the roots, and hang from branches—which makes for some GREAT pictures!”



Jekyll Island
Photo Courtesy of Anna Hall

Hall says that she and the Jekyll Island Authority can find a spot for on the island to fit any couple’s dream—and budget. “My favorite question from brides is ‘How much does it cost to get married on Driftwood Beach?’ because I get to answer, ‘It’s free!’”

About MagnetStreet Weddings

MagnetStreet is an online stationer specializing in personalized designs including **Save the Date Magnets, Wedding Invitations, and Wedding Programs.**

About the Author

Patricia Kelly is a Minneapolis-based journalist and marketing communications writer.