

Dedicated to winter

Snow can be a romantic element of a winter wedding, but it's impossible to predict accurately in the UK. Some overseas wedding photographers, however, offer a winter backdrop as part of the service **WORDS** Terry Hope **PICTURES** Steve Chesler/Craig Robinson

One person's bad weather is another's dream setting. So, while a snowy day in winter in the UK might be a recipe for disaster for a wedding couple, bringing with it the nightmare scenario of road closures, freezing churches and missing guests, for others it's the romantic backdrop to end them all and a perfect setting for a wedding that's white in every sense of the word.

The fact is that weather is only really an issue when it's unpredictable, and there are

places in the world where snow is such a regular part of winter that you can pretty much guarantee its presence and prepare for the fact. While summer weddings are still the number one choice for couples there is a growing appreciation of the atmosphere of a winter event, with its log fires, flickering candlelight and festive feel. If you can throw in a guaranteed crisp white backdrop and maybe a fairytale setting to boot, then all the ingredients are in place for an occasion to remember. >



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Steve Chesler runs a photo business based in the Finger Lakes District of Canandaigua in New York State and within that he offers a dedicated winter wedding service. Set up ten years ago, his studio now supports five employees and six photographers and he caters both for the local population and for couples who choose to fly in during the winter season specifically to take advantage of the opportunity to have their pictures taken against an exquisite winter backdrop.

"Living in Western New York State, any wedding between November and March has the potential to be a winter wedding," says Steve. "We do get a lot of people opting to have their weddings in the Finger Lakes in the warmer months and in the fall when the rolling hills and vineyards are on fire with colour. However, there is still real interest in winter events as well, and those who book at that time not only have the chance to have their wedding in a region which is one of the most spectacular places in the world in the winter, but they also have more choices of venues due to the fact that it's not so busy at that time of year."

Although it's not the overriding focus of his business - around ten of the 50+ weddings which the business tackles each year are winter events - Steve has found that there is enough interest in weddings at this time for him to have set up a dedicated winter wedding photography website, and given his vast experience of handling the specific conditions at this time of year he's come to be seen as an authority on winter wedding techniques. He also offers his services as a wedding photographer prepared to travel to other locations that are known for their regular winter snowfall, such the ski country of Colorado, Lake Placid in the Adirondacks or Lake Louise in Alberta, Canada.

So, what are the logistics of covering a traditional Christmas card style wedding? "Photographing a winter wedding differs greatly from a summer wedding," says

Steve. "First of all the light is completely different. The dominant light is a cool blue tone, especially with the shorter amount of daylight in the winter. We use video lights outside to have the contrast of the warm tungsten light source against the cool blue ambient light. Indoors we look for intimate settings with the tungsten light to convey the feeling of warmth and comfort.

"When shooting outdoors, there are other considerations to take into account, such as the temperature and the wind. The wind is a much bigger concern than the temperature. On a calm cold day, we could shoot outdoors for a while, but if the wind is howling even a three minute trek outdoors can be brutally painful. Keep in mind, most bridal couples are not dressed for a winter hike or ice fishing, so my tolerance is usually much higher than that of the couples!

"I dress in plenty of layers to be comfortable outside without over-heating inside. I also make sure I wear shoes/boots with traction because dress shoes don't do well on ice and snow. The difficult part for me is my fingers getting cold. It's hard to manipulate the camera with gloves on, so I typically wear fingerless gloves. As my fingers get colder though, they lose their dexterity so it becomes harder to control the camera. The cameras I use - a Nikon D300 and D2x and two Fujifilm S5s - don't usually have a problem in the cold temperatures except for battery power. I always keep extra batteries in interior pockets to keep them warm. When one set of batteries gets cold, I switch them out and put the cold batteries on the inside pocket. When they warm up they're good to go again."

Steve has been photographing winter weddings since he first moved to the area in 1995. "I started our winter wedding website www.winterweddingphotography.com several years ago, as an authority on winter weddings," he says. "Wedding photography in general is something you don't want to leave to an inexperienced photographer,

ABOVE: Couples opting for a winter wedding often go the whole hog, and Steve Chesler makes sure to capture details such as a themed ice cake

ABOVE LEFT: In the Finger Lakes District of Canandaigua snow is pretty much guaranteed in the winter months and can look spectacular

and when you throw in the challenges of the cold temperatures on your equipment, slippery conditions, a cold couple, and adverse travel conditions, a photographer who can handle any or all of these situations is essential. While facing all of these challenges, we still create the high quality art that has won us numerous awards with the Professional Photographers of America."

Destination Weddings

Winter weddings are also an important part of the mix for photographer Craig Robinson, who hails from Sacramento in California but who now lives in Prague in the Czech Republic from where he offers a service that effectively covers the whole of Europe.

"I've been based in Prague for about seven years now," says Craig. "I enjoy travel >

"Video lights create a contrast between warm tungsten light and cool blue ambient light"



LEFT: Craig Robinson is based in Prague and as an English-speaking photographer working out of this location he is in an ideal position to provide location wedding shots against a fairytale city background

so much that my career decisions tend to be based solely with that in mind. I decided to be a freelance photographer because it allows me to move around and to pile up pictures. After spending some time in England, Ireland and Germany, I heard that something was 'happening' in Prague in the late 90s. It was a very exciting place to be back then: you could watch the slow transition from the Old Eastern Bloc ways to the faster-paced international city it is today.

"I got into wedding photography by accident. Somebody asked me to do a wedding, I agreed, and several others were recommended to me. I found that weddings were challenging and I could see my 'photojournalistic eye' in the final shots. From this point on I started marketing myself as a documentary wedding photographer. Others offer 'wedding reportage' as a popular style, but I try to be more personal and less obviously 'paparazzi' in my approach. I become a fly on the wall, if you will, and I capture all of the big and small moments of a wedding day and the couples are always surprised to see the shots I got that they didn't see themselves."

Prague has turned out to be a fantastic city to work in and it's increasingly becoming an all-year-round magnet for wedding couples who are looking for an idyllic location to serve as their wedding backdrop. "The architectural beauty and fairytale charm of Prague provide the drawing power, I provide the photographs," says Craig. "My clients come from all over the world, from as far north to south as Norway to South Africa and as far west to east as California to Hong Kong. And all points in between."

"Because my website is in English, most of my wedding clients come from abroad to marry in Prague, or they relocated there for work and met each other in Prague. In terms of publicising what I do, I built my own website from templates and experimented with different fonts, scripts and codes, and just decided to do my own marketing and web promotion. Then came the blogging etc, and things have just grown from there."

"It's hard to keep up at times and I still haven't got into Facebook or Twitter. The internet monster is a hungry beast which needs constant feeding, and actually I would rather be in Paris shooting wedding portraits or in a small Irish town dodging the rain and doing some magazine work than sitting in front of my PC. But this is the Digital Age and I signed up for it wholeheartedly, and it certainly beats the darkroom."

What is it about the winter that attracts wedding couples to Prague? "I think that

the image of snow in an old European city conjures up a special magic for some people," Craig says. "I find that winter weddings in Prague are especially popular with people who don't have real winters, like Australians or New Zealanders."

"Of course the fantasy and the reality are a different story. The downside to a winter wedding in Prague is the simple fact that it is usually -10 Celsius from January through to early March: talk about frozen smiles! I offer the winter wedding special to the brave souls who would like to have the beauty of a Prague winter and aren't afraid of a little cold. Needless to say, when it's -10 outside we try to do Prague backdrop portraits as close to the reception venue as possible. Some of the nicer venues have space heaters on the terraces, and this certainly helps on a cold day."

"If I'm asked for a recommendation I suggest that couples considering Prague as a winter wedding destination plan it for late November or December. During those months there is more snow than ice - which looks great in the pics - and the temperatures hover around freezing or slightly above."

Gear is kept deliberately simple: "I am not a gear freak," says Craig, "and so I don't keep six cameras and 12 lenses and upgrade my camera every six months. I know a lot of photographers think that it's the camera model or the amount of megapixels they have that matters, but I found that I used to carry additional cameras, flashes and lenses but I rarely used them so I unloaded the extra gear. It makes running up and down castle steps MUCH easier!"

"I get by just fine with a single Nikon D70, Nikon 18-70mm f/3.5 DX AF lens and Nikon SB-600 Speedlight. I was planning on getting the new D90 last summer and a Nikon VR 80-200mm zoom lens, but the global crisis has put my upgrade plans on hold."

Craig's prices start at 320 Euros for a Silver Wedding Service, which includes two to three hours shooting and 150-200 high res images supplied on a DVD and rise to 530 Euros for the Platinum service, which includes 5-600 shots supplied on a DVD and all-day wedding coverage which includes trips to multiple locations around Prague if required.

Offering a dedicated winter wedding service helps a photography business to create a year-round income stream, and it's a natural way to go if you happen to be based in a location where you can guarantee some classic winter weather. Naturally you will need to be able to cope with everything that the elements can throw at you and be ready to shoot at speed and to handle some challenging exposures, but the rewards are certainly there for those who choose to specialise. ■

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