



Barcelona is a city to be hen-picked

OVER recent years, European destinations with their cheap flights, accommodation, food and drink have become the go-to spots for hen and stag parties.

Cities like Krakow, Budapest, Amsterdam and Prague offers brides and grooms the perfect spot for a cheap and cheerful last hurrah.

I have been to two of these cities, Krakow and Amsterdam.

And while both have their own charm as well as plenty of things to do and see, for me, neither holds a candle to Barcelona.

The Spanish city has everything a group of ladies could want for a hens — and I don't just say this as a sangria and tapas lover.

Barcelona isn't as synonymous with hen parties as most other popular European cities, especially in eastern Europe.

Don't get me wrong, Barcelona is far from undiscovered — but as far as hen parties go, it isn't the Carrick-on-Shannon of Spain.

It's bustling with people, especially the popular strip of Las Ramblas, but 50 per cent of those tourists aren't walking around wearing L plates on any given weekend.

When I was there for a hen party, all 17 of us who travelled — ranging in age from 25 to 50 — spent our days sightseeing, before dancing the nights away in one of the many clubs on Las Ramblas.

On our first day, we went to La Sagrada Familia — the Catholic Church designed by Antoni Gaudi.

For me, personally, although the architecture and sheer detail of

■ Rachel BERESFORD

the design was exquisite, the price, at just under €30 a pop, was expensive.

Most of the older ladies on the trip, however, said this was the most amazing sight they had ever seen.

Day two was more my thing as we went to Camp Nou, the home of Barcelona FC. This is not generally what the majority of women would want to do on a hens but it's the biggest stadium in Europe, it has to be seen.

At €23 per person, it was worth the visit. Standing on the pitch and looking up at the 100,000-seater stadium is truly an experience.

Tapas

At night, on went the gladrags and off we went for tapas and copious amounts of sangria — of the red, and white as is popular in Barcelona, variety.

On our final day, before flying home late at night with Ryanair — the flights were a steal at €100 — we hit the beach, just a short bus ride from our hotel on Las Ramblas.

Again, that is another positive for Barcelona — the transport is on point and cheap, everywhere we needed to go was just a train or bus journey away and the stations were within walking distance of Las Ramblas.

I found the hotels expensive, however.

We stayed at the Silken Ramblas, which was basic, to say the least, and at €130 per night didn't include breakfast.

But it was on Las Ramblas, where you want to be for a party atmosphere.

FAIRY TALES CAN' COME TRUE

Puerto Rico a dream spot for your wedding

Fact file

- HOTEL:** Gloria Palace Royal, Playa Amadores
- WEDDING PLANNER:** Bernadette Garside, The Perfect Wedding Company — website: www.perfectwedding-company.com
- BRIDAL STORE:** Pronovias Bridal Store — Callel del General Vives, 18, 35007, Las Palmas

THEY say two of the most rewarding — yet stressful — things anyone will do in their life is buy a house and get married.

And when you're getting married abroad, that stress can be multiplied, possibly, ten-fold.

A destination wedding, for many people, is the ultimate fairy tale — the chance to get married to the back-drop of a white sandy beach or walking up the aisle in a home away from home that holds a special place in a couple's heart.

For my sister Lyndsey, who is getting married this May, the latter influenced her decision to have her wedding in Gran Canaria — it is the place where she first met her fiance Robert and it is also where they live with their daughter Katie.

But, like anyone else choosing to wed abroad, they factored in everything before making their decision — most importantly what this would cost their guests in airfare and accommodation.

In the end, one week is working out no more expensive than what a weekend wedding in Ireland would cost — and this has the added bonus of doubling up as a holiday.

Cheap

Flights — a journey which takes just over four hours — are incredibly cheap to Las Palmas Airport, with both Ryanair and Aer Lingus.

I flew to Las Palmas this week to see the hotel where the wedding will take place and the return flight with Ryanair cost just under €150.

The flights I booked for this May, departing Dublin on May 20 and returning 10 days later, cost a little more at €180 with Aer Lingus.

From Las Palmas Airport, bustling Puerto Rico, where my sister lives, is a 20-minute drive while the wedding venue, Gloria Palace Royal, in Amadores is just 10 minutes further.

Amadores, a stunning coastal resort, is quieter than Puerto Rico — making it increasingly popular with brides and grooms.

The hotel sits at one of the highest points in Amadores and so overlooks the whole of the island.



TRANQUIL: The view from Gloria Palace Royal Hotel which overlooks Amadores Beach



SCENIC: Puerto Rico Beach which is just a 10-minute stroll from Amadores

R&R Travel Editor **RACHEL BERESFORD** was in Gran Canaria this week as she helps her sister plan her wedding.

Here, you can read all about Puerto Rico as a sun-kissed wedding destination and the pros and cons of getting married abroad...

venue rather than in a church, so for this reason the ceremony, similar to in Ireland, is much shorter at less than 30 minutes.

For the ceremony decor, my sister has opted to use a wedding planner, Bernadette Garside from The Perfect Wedding Company, who provides all different types of packages.

Decor

She will be providing bouquets for the bride and bridesmaids, flower girl baskets, buttonholes, a floral arch, table centre pieces and various other decor on the day — all of which the couple hand-picks themselves.

Myself and my other sister are both bridesmaids and with us being so far away there is only so much that we have been able to do.

So Bernadette, originally from the UK,

has been a brilliant help during the planning process, acting as a go-between with the hotel and Lyndsey — whose Spanish is limited, to say the least.

Her fiance is fluent — but, well, we all know how involved men get during the planning process. Funnily enough though, he made sure he was at the meeting about the free bar!

This is another thing that you rarely have the luxury of at Irish weddings — but in Gloria Palace Royal it is included in the price per head which is no cheaper than a top hotel in Ireland but certainly offers more bang for your buck.

When I visited the hotel this week, I tasted the wedding menu — and the bar one — and it was nothing short of

exquisite, with large portions and plenty of choice.

I also went with Lyndsey for her second dress fitting. Gran Canaria is becoming more and more popular for weddings so there are no shortage of bridal stores.

Popular

But be aware; while there are plenty of stores to pick a dress from — Pronovias in Las Palmas is one of the most popular and most beautiful — prices aren't any cheaper than in Ireland.

But all in all, my experience so far of helping plan a destination wedding has been nothing but enjoyable — and come May, I've absolutely no doubts that it will be a dream day.

Read all about the wedding in R&R on June 3



ROYAL EXPERIENCE

GLORIA Palace Royal also offer deals for couples wishing to honeymoon in Puerto Rico.

And with its modern spa and restful ambience, it makes for a perfect spot for newlyweds looking to unwind.

With stunning views of Amadores Beach from the hotel pool, the setting is truly serene.

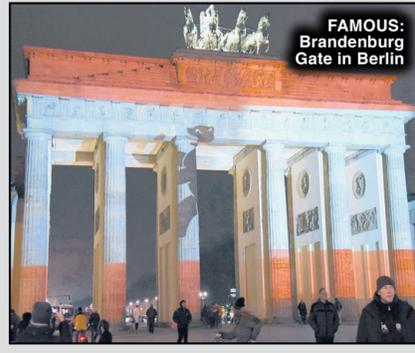
For honeymooners, you can upgrade to a junior suite which comes with all the luxuries you'd expect — private balcony, robes and plenty of personal touches.

The hotel resort also boasts four swimming pools, a show bar, a top-class spa and a wellness centre.

There are also discounts on green fees, with prices with Sunway.ie ranging from €824 in low season to €1,284 in high season.

These prices include flights, with a 20kg bag, half-board accommodation for seven nights and transfers to and from Las Palmas Airport for two adults.

For Gloria Palace Royal deals, see: Sunway.ie or 2311800.



FAMOUS: Brandenburg Gate in Berlin

I could not Ber' the thought of never returning

■ Ronan O'FLAHERTY

WHEN it comes to choosing a destination for a stag weekend, Berlin is out on its own.

While most cities claim to have a little bit for everyone, the German capital goes above and beyond — boasting a lot for everyone.

It's not expensive to get there either, so the old argument about spending a weekend in Ireland to save a huge chunk on costs is wildly exaggerated.

Call me old-fashioned, but the idea of sitting in a pub from morning until night is not my idea of a great weekend away. Even if it is a stag weekend!

Berlin has an outstanding nightlife scene, and that's exactly when it should be enjoyed — after dark.

During daylight hours, there's so much to do that we'd struggle to fit it all into an entire newspaper, let alone this article.

From a picturesque boat ride on the Spree to a visit to Museum Island, this once-troubled city is a world leader in tourist attractions.

Why not take a trip to the Olympic Stadium, which was the host venue for the 1936 Games that were made famous by iconic American athlete, Jesse Owens.

If money is tight, take one of the many walking tours around the city. Most guides don't have a set fee and just ask for a tip, at your discretion, when the tour is finished.

Any guide worth their salt will ensure that you take in world-famous sites like the Brandenburg Gate, Reichstag and Checkpoint Charlie.

After walking around for a couple of hours, you're going to work up an appetite — and this is a good city in which to

be fed.

Berlin is full of restaurants that serve up belly-filling traditional dishes at a modest price.

If you want your dining experience to be more of an occasion, The Bird restaurant is an absolute must.

Book early to avoid disappointment because this eatery, which specialises in mouthwatering beef burgers and steaks, is generally packed to capacity.

The outstanding public transport network in Berlin means that everywhere is easily accessible, so don't be put off by seemingly large distances between locations.

Basis

If you have a summer wedding coming up, we'll work on the basis that your stag weekend is in May.

Weekend return flights to Berlin from Dublin are currently available for €140 from Ryanair.

If you are travelling in a large group, staying in a hostel makes financial sense.

The One80 Hostel in the Mitte district — which has six-bed dorms available in May for €150 per night — is the perfect option. That works out at €50 each for two-nights.

Situated close to the bustling Alexanderplatz Square, the One80 offers free wifi and a cosy bar to get the night started.

This warm and welcoming hostel also runs a pub crawl most nights, which comes highly recommended as the guides take you to all the best nightspots.

Berlin is a place for all ages and all holiday types — and we can't wait to return!



BUSTLING: Las Ramblas in Barcelona

Honeymoons and mini-moons that are sure to kick off married life in true tranquil style

■ Rachel BERESFORD

IN 2015 and last year, Mexico, Las Vegas and Dubai were undoubtedly three of the top honeymoon destinations.

This year, however, a small shift in the trend is expected with secluded island retreats becoming more popular than ever.

Mini-moons are also set to be big in 2017, with couples choosing to unwind for a few days immediately after their wedding before taking a full honeymoon after a few months of wedded bliss.

Here's the destinations that will be a hit in the year ahead...

MULIA RESORT, BALI

THE 'Isle of the Gods' is set to become a

magnet for honeymooning couples looking for total relaxation this year.

The romantic Indonesian island is shrouded in cosy temples (inset right) — the most popular being Pura Luhur Uluwatu, which sits 200 feet above the Indian Ocean and has the most incredible sunset views in the world.

There are also beautiful mountain vistas and vivid colours that will have you mesmerised from the moment you arrive.

The Mulia Resort, which fronts the Nusa Dua coastline — famous for its white sands and

blue seas — is one of the most sought-after on the island.

The hotel, which sits on the very tip of Bali, is stylish and modern and offers seven dining experiences and an indulgence spa.

Tropicallysky.ie are specialists on romantic getaways to Bali and offer some of the best deals around.

For €1,529 to €2,619 in high season, two adults can stay in the Mulia Resort for seven nights.

Prices include flights with luggage, accommodation and airport transfers.



JW MARRIOTT RESORT, VENICE

ONE of the places set to be most popular for mini-moons this year is Venice.

Surely, there is no better way to begin married life than by taking a gondola ride through the Grand Canal as you take in the historic architecture of the many gothic palaces.

And nothing says 'amore' like the central square, Piazza San Marco, home to St Mark's Basilica and the Palazzo Ducale.

You can then escape the sounds with a boat trip to one of the many unspoilt islands in the Adriatic sea.

And one of the most romantic hotels in all of Venice is the newly-revamped JW Marriott Venice which is located on a private island just a 15-minute ferry ride from the heart of Venice.

The Marriott will set you back — but the luxurious hotel does offer some terrific deals throughout the year.

A four-night stay between May to August will cost up to €1,500 for a king room for two people with breakfast.

This off-season, however, to celebrate their reopening, the hotel is offering 20 per cent off any stay between March 16 and April 30 as well as €50 resort credit that can be used however you please.

Fact file

- MULIA RESORT, BALI:** For Mulia Resort, Bali deals see: www.tropicallysky.ie or call (01) 6649999 (Dublin)/ 066 7164410 (Tralee).
- JW MARRIOTT, VENICE:** For deals at the JW Marriott Resort and Spa in Venice, see: www.jwvenice.com/en/