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FIELD NOTES

Mexico, Once in Demand, Loses Its Brides and Grooms

By MICHELLE HIGGINS

ADD swine flu to the list of potential pre-wedding worries. Many couples who had planned on destination weddings in Mexico this spring or summer are now scrambling to find an alternative spot or postponing their events indefinitely.

"My situation right now is completely up in the air," said Natalia Velasquez, a graphic designer from Minneapolis, who was planning to marry her fiancé, Jake Erling, a martial arts instructor, next week before 15 friends and family members at the Dreams Tulum Resort & Spa, south of Playa del Carmen. But because of swine flu fears and the fact that Mr. Erling has cystic fibrosis, making him especially vulnerable to any type of flu, they have decided to postpone their event and are now considering either taking the wedding to Jamaica on another date, or waiting it out. "We're trying not to panic," she said.

"Brides are notably petrified," said Carley Roney, editor in chief at the Knot (theknot.com), a wedding planning Web site that recently devoted a forum to Mexico weddings because of the flood of concern from couples with weddings planned in the region. "But because they've invested so much around this psychologically, most of them can't even imagine not continuing on with the plans," she said.

Their guests, however, can.

Earlier this week, JoAnn Gregoli, owner of Elegant Occasions, a wedding planning agency in New York, sent a young New York couple off to Mexico's Riviera Maya, south of Cancún. This was before the World Health Organization had raised the alert level of the fast-spreading swine flu to Phase 5. As the days wore on and the virus spread, however, the guest list dwindled to 26 from 88.

"It's just awful," said Ms. Gregoli, who sent her staff down to the resort with a suitcase full of protective masks and gobs of hand sanitizer. Those who could get a prescription brought along Tamiflu. "I can't tell you how my heart breaks for this girl."

Until the recent economic downturn put a damper on travel, the destination wedding industry had been booming. And according to a 2008 survey of 18,000 users of the Knot, Mexico was a top locale, accounting for roughly 12 percent of international destination weddings,

thanks to easy access from both the East and West coasts of the United States, comparatively low prices and exotic appeal.

Where would you rather get married, Ms. Roney asked, "Detroit or Los Cabos?"

But the swine flu has blighted its wedding appeal.

"We have had cruise passengers call, freaking out; brides with weddings in July having panic attacks — just wonderful!" said Terry McCabe, a travel agent at Altour in New York.

While some resorts are waiving cancellation fees and penalties for brides who want to switch venues, others are not being so accommodating. "I have one such couple who have been paying on their honeymoon for over a year and have no recourse but to cancel with a current 50 percent penalty of a \$5,000 booking

or take the trip," said Lindsay Wendt-Sheikh, president of the Destination Wedding Association, a trade group.

For now, there seems to be one upside to the destination wedding fallout in Mexico. As brides look for alternative locales, the Caribbean is benefiting from a rise in bookings.

Travel agents say that owing to the general downturn in travel, finding alternatives hasn't been too much of an issue — particularly

where the affected resorts are part of large chains.

"We're not having a problem rescheduling for other Marriott hotels," said Catherine Leitner, a spokeswoman for the chain's Caribbean and Latin American properties. Marriott has moved several groups, including some wedding parties, from Puerto Vallarta, Cancún and Mexico City to Caribbean resorts, she said.

The Ritz-Carlton hotel in San Juan has picked up more than a hundred rooms from its sibling property in Cancún and other Mexican hotels.

Ocean Club Resorts in the Turks and Caicos says it has received an increase in group bookings, including weddings, relocating to the resort from Mexico. "It's not that we're thrilled that they're having to relocate and that their plans will be disrupted," said Julia Maximo, who heads up its group and wedding sales. But, she added, "It's certainly good for us."



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