



We

Do

Mountain settings
give romance a
great start

By Jan Wondra

The SteamPlant offers the perfect ceremony setting for a happy couple.
Photo by Sarah Hill

If you're planning your wedding, you may already have discovered what brides across the country have already learned: The Upper Arkansas Valley — from Chaffee County up into Lake County — are becoming increasingly popular wedding destinations.

The combination of gorgeous high mountain settings, sunshine, and the hospitality of historic towns are attracting Front Range couples and guests from around the world. The mountain setting is just 2.5-hour drive from Denver via U.S. 285, and around an 1.5 hours from Colorado Springs and Pueblo.

Experts term the destination "mountain rustic." Couples call it romantic.

"What we've seen in the past five years is tremendous growth in destination weddings across Chaffee County," said Christopher Kolomitz of Settings Event Rental. "It's not just the big event places, but the small businesses that make weddings here so memorable. No matter the venue a couple selects for their mountain wedding celebration, the setting of the Upper Arkansas Valley won't disappoint. It's a testament to small business here in Chaffee County that we make a bride and groom feel so comfortable."

The Heart of the Rockies Wedding Association is a collaboration of more than 30 small businesses, from event planners, florists, musicians and DJs, to hotels and lodging, caterers, officiants, event rental companies, make up artists, photographers, and event venues that can quite literally put on any kind of wedding, nearly anywhere in the high country.

"We're a one-stop shop for wedding planning," said Kolomitz.

The group has coordinated themed weddings, weddings on sites throughout the area including on top of mountains, even photo booths and unique party favors, to name a few of their feats.

"We're accustomed to working together so we can seamlessly put on an event



An outdoor wedding set to take place at The Bighorn Lodge and Love Meadow. *Photo by Settings Event Rental*

at a rustic setting like the historic Hutchinson Ranch, to Big Horn Lodge and Love Meadow up in Chalk Creek Canyon, to a mountain top,” said Kolomitz, whose company rents everything from nine different styles of chairs, to china, bar setups, and its signature frame and cable tents for outdoor settings. “We have everything a bride and groom could want for a gorgeous and memorable wedding experience.”

The SteamPlant Event Center in Salida is a popular venue that is also a member of the Heart of the Rockies Wedding Association. Located in a renovated 1887 steam power plant, it sits directly on the bank of the Arkansas River, and its outside plaza is frequently used for wedding ceremonies. The ballroom features century-old, exposed brick walls, natural hardwood floors and a 30-foot high ceiling.

Among the advantages of a wedding at the SteamPlant is that much of what is needed for festivities is provided on site, including an on-site event coordinator, ceremony tables and chairs, musician tables, and staff for setup and break-down of the event. The SteamPlant also manages its own food and beverage service.

“We call it a stylish urban wedding venue,” said event coordinator Shannon Daileader. “The average size of a wedding here is between 115 and 160 guests, but our ballroom and mezzanine can hold an event for 200 people. Couples like to hold either their ceremony or pre-dinner cocktail reception on our plaza overlooking the river. Others have held their ceremony in Riverside Park and walked along the river path to their reception here.”

Among the larger venues for destination weddings in Chaffee County, Mount Princeton Hot Springs Resort is located in Chalk Creek Canyon, between two 14,000 foot peaks — Mount Princeton and Mount Antero. Spread across 500 acres of activity, from its historic hot springs and spa to a cliff-side conference

center, hotel, sophisticated cabins, award-winning restaurant and an event pavilion, the resort offers a one-stop wedding experience.

“We find our brides marrying on our scenic meadow, in the event pavilion, or beside the rushing waters of Chalk Creek surrounded by flower beds,” Executive Director of Sales Zelma Warren said. “The pavilion features a stunning wall of glass doors, providing spectacular views of the peaks and Chalk Cliffs.”

“Our full-service spa is a wonderful amenity for brides preparing for the big day, and our event pavilion can comfortably seat 180 with room for a large dance floor. We are unique because we offer the convenience of having a ceremony, reception and lodging all in one area. In fact, our dedicated event chef works from a full service, on-site catering kitchen. A wedding at Mount Princeton is truly a mountain celebration.”

Not to be outdone, Lake County, where its county seat,



A wedding party gets ready to enjoy Mount Princeton Hot Springs Resort post-ceremony top of the line cuisine. *Photo by Scott Peterson*

Leadville, is the highest municipality in the United States, is growing in popularity, too. Many couples planning weddings there are drawn to outdoor-type venues where the peaks of Mount Massive and Mount Elbert provide a stunning backdrop, summer or winter.

Lake County venues include the Tennessee Pass Nordic Center, Ski Cooper, and the Twin Lakes area where both the lakes and the mountains provide a scenic backdrop. Many couples select historic Lake County venues such as the Healy House in Leadville, the newly-restored Twin Lakes Schoolhouse or the Twin Lakes Inn in Twin Lakes, or the stage at the Tabor Opera House in Leadville.

Some couples choose to set up wedding ceremonies on public land, while the Tennessee Pass Nordic Center is a frequent wedding site that combines great beauty with the rustic flavor of a cookhouse and sleep yurts.

"We can host wedding groups up to 200 guests at the main lodge," said Stephanie Randall of the Nordic Center. We have a gorgeous remote location, our Cookhouse, that is one mile up in the woods that can hold 125 guests. People can take ATVs up or we can arrange shuttles,, but most wedding guests walk up."

The Nordic Center is open year-around. Not only can it host guests in tents and yurts, it handles all its own catering and has a liquor license. Couples need to work six months to a year ahead to reserve space.

"We work with an equipment rental company called Tents and Events to coordinate all the ceremony and reception setups," added Randall. "Depending upon the season, couples plan inside



"S" marks a super ceremonial setting. Photo by Phreckles Photography-Cailey McDermott

or outside wedding events. If they want to hold both the wedding and the reception in one spot, then the Nordic Center can hold the reception and dinner for 80 guests, and at the Cookhouse we can hold 45 for weddings and receptions."

In most cases, those interested in a Lake County wedding should contact their preferred venue directly.

"People are coming from all over the world to get married here," said Daileader, whose comments, while specific to the SteamPlant, could well cover the entire high country area from Leadville to Salida. "The people on the Front Range in particular know about us. For people who love this area, this is your one stop shop."

Jan Wondra is a staff writer at The Mountain Mail in Salida.

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