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# Ceremony for 2, Please. And Make It Fancy!

Forget quickie weddings in Vegas. Lavish elopements are growing in popularity, and we have social media to thank.

**By Shivani Vora**

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Ludan Wu and Johnny Phaipanya, high school sweethearts from Chicago, were engaged for two years and planning a small wedding with family and close friends. But last December they made an impromptu decision to elope.

“We ultimately realized that we wanted the day to be only about being with each other, and that meant having no one else there,” said Ms. Wu, 32, a management consultant.

Elopements typically conjure up images of last-minute weddings in Las Vegas chapels or civil ceremonies at local courthouses. But a simple celebration for two wasn’t quite what Ms. Wu and Mr. Phaipanya, 34, a broker strategist, had in mind.

The couple wed on Feb. 27 at the University Club of Chicago’s Cathedral Hall, an ornate room with stained-glass windows and vaulted ceilings. Ms. Wu primped for the ceremony with help from makeup and hair stylists and wore a Vera Wang lace gown. Mr. Phaipanya donned a custom-made Prada tuxedo.

After their vows, they danced to Ellie Goulding’s “How Long Will I Love You,” played by a three-piece band, and toasted with Dom Pérignon Champagne. At sunset, they had a photo shoot on the rooftop of the LondonHouse hotel, where a videographer captured aerial footage of the newlyweds from a drone. Then they spent the night in a suite at the Langham hotel.

Somewhere along the way, they shared the news that they had married with families and friends on FaceTime.

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Ms. Wu’s and Mr. Phaipanya’s two-person wedding cost \$75,000. “It was the dream day and worth every penny,” she said.



Their two-person wedding, which included a suite at the Langham hotel, cost \$75,000.  
Ashley Fisher Photography

Lavish elopements like Ms. Wu's and Mr. Phaipanya's — ones that rival or surpass conventional weddings with many guests — are growing in popularity, according to wedding planners and owners of wedding consulting companies.

“Years ago, couples who eloped would get married on a sandy beach or in Vegas, but that trend is changing,” she Rebecca Grinnals, the founder of Engaging Concepts, which works with wedding planners, hotels and event spaces and holds wedding industry conferences.

Ms. Grinnals says her clients report an increase in lavish secret weddings that couples spend months in planning. “For a while, it was all about smaller weddings for a few dozen people,” she said, “but now you see these over-the-top ones just for two that require the same amount of work or more than ones for 250.”

Jess Levin Conroy, the founder and chief executive of Carats & Cake, a wedding planning site, also reported a rise in extravagant elopements. She attributed the increase, in part, to the ubiquity of social media. “Instagram gives couples the ability to have a private wedding, yet put it in the limelight,” she said. “With all the imagery and videos you can instantly share, friends and family can feel like they were part of the celebration.”

In Ms. Conroy's experience, many of the eloping couples are seeking a private celebration because they're getting married either for the second time or later in life and are less interested in a social affair. “They're keen on keeping the entire focus of the day on themselves,” she said.

Many modern-day elopements are destination weddings. There are even companies like Destination Elope that specializes in planning them. The co-founders Jessica Sloane, a wedding planner, and Natalie Watson, a wedding photographer, said that most of the couples who contact them want weddings in dramatic settings like the edge of a cliff in Big Sur or in the middle of the desert in Joshua Tree National Park.

“They’re asking for intimacy mixed with a wow factor,” said Ms. Sloane, adding that social media has also played a role in the rising popularity of elaborate elopements. “Couples justify it because they know that they can let other people in through Instagram.”

Cristina Verger, the owner of a New York-based event planning company that bears her name, orchestrated a two-person destination wedding on Jan. at the Lotte New York Palace hotel in Midtown Manhattan. The total cost was more than \$100,000.

“I pulled it together in less than a month,” she said, “and it was definitely the most unique event I have ever planned.”

The couple, Bojana Sukovic, 37, and Branislav Bozic, 39, live in Las Vegas and wanted to marry in New York because it’s their favorite city.



Bojana Sukovic and Branislav Bozic had a private ceremony at the Lotte New York Palace hotel. Hechler Photographers



While some over-the-top elopements are driven by a couple's desire to have their sole attention on each other, Ms. Sukovic, a lawyer, and Mr. Bozic, the owner of a transportation business, had other reasons. "Our parents live in Serbia and couldn't get visas to come here," Ms. Sukovic said, "and if they couldn't be with us, we didn't want anyone else to be either."

Both described their wedding as a "romantic fairy tale." They bought out the hotel's 19th-century gold-gilded Villard Mansion at the hotel and had a civil ceremony in one of its wood-paneled rooms. Ms. Sukovic wore a \$12,000 lace gown from the Lebanese designer Zuhair Murad and \$5,000 Jimmy Choo shoes adorned with crystals.

Their reception, in the mansion's Madison Room, included a D.J. and a small band that kept them dancing through the evening to songs by Michael Jackson and Ed Sheeran.



The couple enjoyed a five-course dinner that included premium wines and Champagnes.  
Hechler Photographers

For dinner, Ms. Verger worked with a floral designer to set up a half moon table laden with roses and hydrangeas and created a five-course menu that included premium wines and Champagnes and dishes like truffle Brie and Kobe beef. An eight-person staff tended to the newlyweds while they ate.

Barbi and Daniel J. Poisson of Budapest also spent six figures on their elopement, which took place May, 8, 2018 at the Four Seasons Resort Lanai in Hawaii. A large portion of their budget, though, was for activities they enjoy as a couple.



Barbi and Daniel J. Poisson married on the Hawaiian island of Lanai. The festivities included activities they enjoy as a couple. Daniel J. Poisson

Ms. Poisson bought two dresses for the occasion — one for their day adventures and another for the evening. They started with an early morning helicopter ride of the island and a top-down Jeep tour along the coastline and through pine trees. A horseback riding session through farm fields while each wore \$1,000 monogrammed leather boots came next, followed by a swim in the ocean in their clothes.

For the evening, they donned casual attire. Ms. Poisson, 30, a restaurant owner, wore a sleeveless V-neck gown, and Mr. Poisson, 51, the owner of a distribution company, dressed in custom-made Ermenegildo Zegna khaki slacks and a white long-sleeved shirt. They were married by a minister on the beach with their toes in the sand and savored a leisurely dinner under the stars.

They exchanged vows on beach.  
Daniel J. Poisson



Their families were less than thrilled when they heard about the elopement, and Mr. and Ms. Poisson appeased them by having a party last August in Budapest for 350 of their family and friends.

“That day was for them,” Mr. Poisson said. “Our elopement was for us, and it was perfection.”