

The Most Expensive Wedding Decision Is Often the One Nobody Chose

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The most expensive wedding decision is often the one nobody actually chose.

It arrives disguised as a reasonable question:

"Is this what people are doing now?"

That question can move a celebration from beautiful to overextended without anyone ever deciding they want extravagance. Each choice is benchmarked against peers, Instagram, family expectations, and the fear of looking cheap. Then the benchmark becomes the budget.

Thorstein Veblen gave us a useful lens for understanding this. He argued that wealth is accumulated not only for comfort, but for the honor and distinction it communicates. We compare ourselves with those above us, and each new level becomes the starting point for the next comparison. The desire for pecuniary superiority is therefore difficult to satisfy.

Weddings are especially vulnerable to this dynamic because they combine hospitality, family reputation, taste, and public visibility in one event.

The practical question is not whether a choice is luxurious. Luxury can be genuinely generous, beautiful, and meaningful.

The better question is: What job is this expense doing?

I recommend sorting major decisions into three categories:

1. Experience Does it improve comfort, welcome, pleasure, connection, or the flow of the celebration?
2. Expression Does it reflect the couple's or family's actual preferences, history, values, or aesthetic instincts?
3. Signaling Is its primary function to demonstrate that the family can afford it, keep pace with peers, or avoid appearing lesser by comparison?

A single choice can belong to more than one category. The point is not to eliminate signaling. Every public celebration communicates something. The point is to identify when signaling has quietly become the main purpose.

Veblen called this pattern "conspicuous consumption": valuable goods used as visible evidence of wealth and social reputability. He also made a subtler point: costliness can masquerade as beauty. We may experience an expensive object as more beautiful partly because its price carries social meaning.

That is why a useful planning exercise is to remove the price and the audience from the conversation:

- Would we still choose this if no peer ever saw it?
- Would it matter if it were not photographed?
- Does it create a better experience, or simply a more legible display of means?
- Are we adding it because it is desired-or because the previous decision now feels insufficient?

This is not an argument for austerity. It is an argument for authorship.

Status competition has a way of turning yesterday's indulgence into today's "necessary" standard. Habits become attached to self-respect and social decency, which is why reducing an accustomed level of spending can feel emotionally harder than raising it.

The best celebrations are not necessarily the least lavish. They are the ones in which beauty, generosity, and meaning remain distinguishable from comparison.

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