

# The Margins of a Frequent Flyer

Calculating the costs of being a destination wedding photographer that shoots film.

BY ERICH MCVEY



OPPOSITE PAGE: The Cliffs of Moher, County Clare, Ireland.  
PICTURED: Joceline and her bridesmaids on the morning of her wedding, shot in Alila Uluwatu, Bali.

ALL PHOTOS © ERICH MCVEY

# As I write this, I'm on a flight from Portland to Seattle, the first of three legs en route to Bali for my first wedding of 2019. My roller bag, laden with four cameras and all of the other equipment I use to shoot weddings, is stowed overhead.

I've also got my backpack, stuffed to the gills with more than 200 rolls of film. It is monopolizing my legroom, like it does on just about every flight. While the backpack full of film is an inconvenience, it has become an extension of my body over the years. When traveling for work, it's with me at all times—especially on return trips, when I'm cradling the entire photographic documentation of a precious wedding day.

The second leg of my trip is underway: Seattle to Seoul. After a couple podcasts, a few movies, a glass of wine (okay, two glasses) and a quick nap, the novelty of guilt-free rest and entertainment has worn off and the reality that I still won't see my hotel room for another 12 hours has set in. It's a bit lonely traveling so much for weddings, but I appreciate the quiet time. Quiet time is a rare commodity now that my wife, Amy, and I have an energetic 3-year-old daughter keeping us busy. I usually travel alone and hire locally when shooting destination events. The cost of international flights and accommodations add up, and I more often prefer spending my assistant budget on the time and talent of a great local film

shooter. A solid assistant is well worth the investment, and finding local talent is made simpler through the use of networking and social media these days. With a steadily growing film community, finding great help, even on a remote island like Mallorca, has proven to be an easy task.

Long gone are the days when Amy and I embarked on these adventures together. She's back at home with our young daughter. Maybe once the little one is old enough to appreciate the experience, she and Amy will come along.

Hold up, that's two extra plane tickets, and these flights are expensive! No, that's *three* extra plane tickets if we bring Grandma along to babysit while Amy helps me shoot the wedding.

Family time is great, but I like to prioritize that for time off from weddings. When I'm traveling for a job, the bottom line is just that: the bottom line. Profit margins are serious business, and they are something I work really hard to keep an eye on when doing destination work. For my business plan and goals, I like to be around 75 percent profit, in relation to the hard costs required to execute the job. I know that number is going

to drop closer to 66 percent when the costs of running my business come into play (considering my equipment, website, advertising and so on), so I try to get as close as possible. I also know that I'm an optimist, and in the past, I have underestimated my costs on film and processing, flights, hotels, transfers and meals, and have even forgotten about unexpected costs like rising album prices.

Profit margin is far and away my main consideration in building custom quotes for potential clients. We've all taken hours to formulate a custom package before hesitantly hitting send and thinking, "Well, that could either be half of what I should be charging or double, but screw it." I personally don't want to spend hours putting a quote together when I'm likely to book only one in five, or even one in ten weddings, for which I send such a quote. Instead of starting from scratch, I reference my existing wedding packages and à la carte pricing to come up with a jumping off point. Then I run "The Test."

"The Test" is simply comparing the amount I charge to the amount I expect to spend. Let's say I receive an inquiry for a wedding in Bali, and the client wants to book me for 8 hours of wedding-day coverage and 3 hours of welcome-dinner coverage, with no additional add-ons like albums, engagements or second shooters.

I'm going to spend about \$150 on film and processing per hour of daylight coverage (I don't shoot as much film indoors or at night), so we're looking at roughly \$1,600.

My flights from the West Coast will run \$1,200.

When traveling to Europe or Asia, the minimum number of nights I want to stay is five, giving me enough time to adjust to the time change as well as scout locations and shoot scenery, so we're looking at \$1,000 per night for lodging.

My assistant will run \$1,200. I

## MY PACKING LIST

**Bag:** Think Tank Airport International Roller

**Headphones:** Bose (noise cancelling)

**Film:** Fuji 400H, Portra 800 (for low-light shooting), Ilford Delta 400 and 3200

**Cameras:** Contax 645 (x2), Contax Polaroid back (for testing), Nikon F6 35mm, Nikon D800

**Lenses:** Contax 45mm and 80mm (x2); NIKKOR 24-70mm, 58mm, 85mm

**Flash:** Nikon SB-800

**Camera Accessories:** Contax Polaroid back (for testing), Contax extension tube (for macro shots—it saves a lot of room in lieu of a macro lens), Hoya Close-Up Filters

**Detail Accessories:** Layout styling kit, FrouFrou Chic fabrics, Marbella dishes (for styling details)



PICTURED: On Bali's Kubu Beach photographing a custom gown, designed by Yefta Gunawan, for an editorial on *Bridestory*, an online wedding vendor resource guide.

always offer assistants a flat rate and let them book their own travel because it saves everyone time and gives them the flexibility to plan based on personal preferences.

Food and transit could easily add up to \$500.

From these quick calculations, I'm confident in my estimation of

\$5,500 in hard costs, which would bring my total quote to \$22,000 if I want to make my 75 percent margin. Using my pre-existing packages and à la carte pricing, my initial estimate was \$23,000, so I'm right in the ballpark and comfortable in that price range.

Now, this is just a starting point. Many factors will determine

exactly where I'll ultimately come in on a quote: How badly do I want the wedding? Am I likely to book another wedding on this date? There are no rules—it's all done by feel, and I always do what's best for myself and my business. Of course, if I know I'm going head-to-head with a fellow photographer, I'll do my best to

avoid undercutting anyone. If it's apparent that the client truly wants to work with me and it only requires a small concession to make that happen, ensuring I'll bring home a paycheck on that date, I'm very likely to make that call. This does not devalue me as a photographer, and I don't believe it hurts the industry.

"But Erich, did you factor in all of the additional time spent traveling, working and being away from home?" Absolutely. My pricing guide for international weddings starts considerably higher than that of my domestic pricing, and *all* travel is always included in my packages.

A client or planner should never have to think about the breakdown of what they are spending on photography and what they are spending on their photographer's travel. I hear time and time again from couples and planners alike that they appreciate this simplified approach. It is also worth noting that I charge the same to shoot anywhere outside of North America. When it comes down to it, my travel costs are fairly consistent no matter where I go. I save a lot of admin time by streamlining my process, and costs always seem to even out because some trips will cost a bit less than expected and some will cost a bit more.

I've spent years building this side of my business and getting my gross versus net profit margins where they are today. Shooting destination weddings did not always provide me with big paychecks, especially when I was first breaking into the market. My profit margins used to be terrible. It took time to maximize profits by building my business the right way: Every decision I made early on was based on long-term goals rather than short-term profits. Instinct might tell you to shoot the amount of film that's going to ensure that you still turn a healthy profit, but I believe that in order to create the

PICTURED: **Wes & Nina's**  
**10-year vow renewal,**  
**Ulvic, Norway.**



high-caliber galleries necessary to attract high-paying clients and compete in the marketplace, you have to be willing to take a hit in the short term and consider it an investment.

Back in 2013, I would have paid a client to let me shoot their French château wedding. If I'd gone and tried to shoot that wedding with 15 rolls of film instead of the 40 or more rolls I knew would be required to properly capture the event, I would have crippled myself artistically and limited my potential to create a product that demands a higher price point in the future.

Simply put, building a high-end portfolio and reputation as a destination photographer has allowed me to raise my prices incrementally on an ongoing basis. My profit margins have not improved because I've become more efficient in my costs. I spend more and more on film every year, but my margins continue to improve. This is a product of playing the long game. Investing in the future like this is

a necessary part of the process, and a worthwhile one at that. It legitimized and added value to my brand by building my portfolio, proving to future couples that I was capable of working in similar circumstances while keeping me fulfilled as an artist.

When you're just starting out, destination weddings can seem like the holy grail of the wedding industry. Far off countries, remote locations, ceremonies taking place on top of mountains or on white sand beaches...destination weddings really can be incredible. But they aren't the benchmark for success or self-worth as a photographer. I've seen a number of extremely talented photographers maintain a wildly successful business at home by working almost exclusively within their local markets. It's what makes them happy, and it's what makes them a living. For me, I crave the variation, challenges and excitement that come with the territory as a destination photographer. Plus, I really like the bubble tea in the Seoul airport (I just had two on my layover).

Finally, I've made it the last leg

of my trip—Seoul to Denpasar—and I'm feeling grateful. While I'm away for the next week, my wife will wake up at 6 a.m. every morning and spend her days caring for our girl, because I'm not there to share the workload. I'll miss them, but I'm not going to take these opportunities for granted. I'll appreciate the alone time and the luxury of sleeping in. I'll take time to enjoy the beautiful landscapes, explore cities, experience cultures and meet people from all corners of the world that I'll have the opportunity to shoot because of my profession. I won't lose sight of how lucky I am as an artist to be continually challenged and fulfilled. And, if my calculations were correct, I'll even bring home the bacon. **Rf**

***Erich McVey** is a wedding, portrait and editorial film photographer with a love for medium-format cameras, natural light and incredible scenery. He combines documentary and fine-art styles to capture beautiful, honest and timeless images for his clients around the world.*

## I WISH I HAD KNOWN...

...the benefits of using an airline-affiliated credit card for all business purchases, and flying on the same airline as often as possible. I have flown around the world many times, using miles earned strictly from credit card spending.

...the importance of arriving many days prior to the wedding, getting my bearings and adjusting to the time difference. Though I've followed this guideline on the vast majority of trips, the few times I didn't (whether by necessity or choice) left me feeling a bit foggy early on in the day. As we all know, a wedding day does not afford a photographer a grace period to ease in.

...the luxury of staying as close to the wedding venue as possible. There is nothing better than a short trip to the wedding and a short trip home on a workday that's already long.

...that it's often considerably more convenient and inexpensive to hire taxis, rather than rent a car, in foreign countries. The stress related to driving a stick shift on the opposite side of very narrow, motorcyclist-filled roads has taken a few years off of my life.