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One of the most spectacular sights at the Indian Hills Country Club golf course in Prairie Village last summer had nothing to do with golf at all.

What surprised onlookers saw was a stunning procession—led by a professional bagpiper in full regalia, followed by newlyweds Alasdair and Lindsay Reid, their bridal party and wedding guests—filling their way across the course to the country club's reception hall.

Photography by Rebecca Friend





What they witnessed was a creative, memorable "grand exit."

Paul McMillian, a 35-year veteran of wedding photography, describes the couple's exit as one of the most beautiful he's photographed in recent years and a scene more reminiscent of Scotland than Kansas City.

Lindsay Reid says she wanted her wedding to reflect the cultural heritage of her new extended family, a number of whom traveled across the Atlantic from Edinburgh for the festivities. "It was a multisensory experience," she says, "and the exit was a big part of it."

McMillian, owner of Van Deusen Photography in Prairie Village, says grand exits, which typically occur between the wedding ceremony and the reception these days, are often very creative. Some couples design their exit with inventive sights and sounds in mind. "The biggest trend I'm seeing," McMillian says, "is the ringing of bells."

McMillian was present for an extraordinary variation on that theme, orchestrated by one local couple who gathered together an assortment of antique bells for their families and bridal party. Each of those bells had distinctively different tonal qualities. And when they were combined with the many small bells that were distributed to all the other guests, the result was awe-inspiring sound. "People really enjoyed that departure," McMillian says.

New ideas for making a splash as you leave your ceremony or reception.

Tossing Around Some New Ideas

Long gone are the days when newlyweds left their guests under a simple shower of tossed rice. Even birdseed, introduced as a more ecologically friendly alternative, is quickly becoming passé. Today, many wedding venues actually discourage or even prohibit the tradition altogether.

Rose petals are a popular exception. However, that ritual also comes with some restrictions since the darker petals can stain carpet and even concrete. Still, Kindra Browne, owner of Simple Elegance wedding consultants in Olathe and Lee's Summit, is a self-described "sucker for petals" because they're easy to pull off and they produce beautiful pictures.

Exit, Stage Left

By Susan Jay

"I've planned several weddings where we've used a mixture of petals—pink, yellow and white. The guests fling them out of paper cones as the couple passes by," Browne explains. "As long as I bring a broom and sweep them up quickly, it's not been an issue."

If tossing is not allowed at your wedding locale, then what are the alternatives?

Mandy Phalen, owner of Event Studio planners in Leawood, says that "Bubbles are all the rage." They're extremely popular for less formal weddings where more children are present. Sparklers are another entertaining choice. Available online in

any season, Phalen calls them "an enchanting addition to a dusk or evening event."

Other ideas to incorporate into a grand exit include a release of helium-filled balloons, butterflies or ceremonial white pigeons, all of which make for picture-perfect moments.

Take Your Best Shot

A wedding is not just a life-changing event; it is a photo opportunity at every turn. Since grand exits take considerable time to choreograph, an estimated half of

today's brides and grooms are trading the time it takes for one great exit shot and investing it elsewhere.

There are two main scenarios. Although most couples now complete their official wedding pictures before their ceremony, there are still holdouts who are adamant that they will not see each other until the bride walks down the aisle. In that case, they must take those pictures as their guests are leaving the church and traveling to the reception site.

Some of these couples stage a "fake leave"—a photo op designed around a quick exit, a drive around the block and a back-door return for the official photo shoot while the guests are still departing.

The second scenario is one preferred by Tyler Wirken of Wirken Photography in Brookside: Wirken says the majority of his clients already have their formal photo session behind them before the ceremony. Right after it, then, they choose to shoot additional pictures around town before they go to the reception.

While any number of bridal parties can be found posing for photographers at Kansas City's most famous fountains, Wirken often guides his newlyweds to lesser-known architectural backdrops in the downtown area, the Crossroads District or near Union Station. "We try to do something unexpected and, at the same time, create photos that reflect the couple's personality," Wirken says.

Yet another reason grand exits are getting shorter shrift these days is the trend toward evening weddings, often followed by receptions that run until 11 p.m. or later. A grand exit, in this case, doesn't work when most of the guests have already left and those remaining no longer look their photographic best.

Also cited by top planners is the average age of today's newlyweds. Typically, they're no longer just out of college; instead, they're young professionals whose goal is not to escape as quickly as possible to begin their honeymoon. "A lot of our brides and grooms have people who've come in from out of state or even out of the country, so couples definitely want to spend time with them," says Chrysalyn Huff, owner of Event-Fully Yours in Olathe.

Many weddings have become multi-day events, beginning with a rehearsal dinner on Friday night and concluding with a Sunday brunch. "That is a huge trend for us right now," Huff says.

Planner Kindra Browne agrees and says guests' expectations are higher today. "The bar has been raised a lot, in my opinion, over the last five years."

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The Getaway Car

That higher bar also extends to wedding transportation. Jeff Veatch, owner of Executive Limousines, says wedding parties are getting larger and transportation is following suit. "We used to provide vehicles just for the bride and groom, but now they're inviting the entire wedding party to come along."

Instead of town cars or classic limousines, the 14-passenger limo coach is a current top choice. Though it looks like a minibus on the exterior, it's set up like a limo with perimeter seating and all the traditional amenities on the inside. Unlike a conventional limousine, however, you can stand up in the limo coach.

With the number of out-of-town guests on the rise, limo services are also running more shuttle buses on round-trip routes from hotels to wedding and reception sites. "Couples don't want people having to worry about parking or getting lost," Veatch says. He also believes that concerns about the consequences of drinking and driving are another factor behind the surge in guest transportation.

In addition to limousine coaches and even larger party buses, trolleys are a big hit among today's brides and grooms. They tend to be a more expensive alternative, but they seat from 24 to 32 passengers. "People like them because they're different," says Meredith Clarkson, director of sales and marketing for Overland Limo.

Other common choices for weddings in Kansas City include stretch Hummers, a Rolls-Royce or a classic antique car. Horse-drawn carriages, particularly around the Plaza area, are also contracted for bridal parties on an hourly basis.

There are more atypical alternatives, geared toward specific wedding themes, too: Harleys for motorcycle enthusiasts or boats on area lakes, for example. Huff has even planned a local wedding with a hot-air balloon lift as the exit. "The bride had always wanted to go up in a balloon, so that was something her groom decided to do for her," Huff says.

Wirken laughs when asked about the most unusual getaway vehicle he's ever seen. His answer? "A firetruck for a couple in Prairie Village last year."

According to Wirken, when the groom-to-be was just 3 years old, all he wanted for Christmas was a firetruck. It was the first present he opened that year, and he didn't open up anything else. When he proposed to his bride, he told her: "You're my firetruck."

"When I heard that story in our very first meeting," Wirken recalls, "I thought to myself, 'We need to get our hands on a firetruck.'" The photographer happened to notice an old fire engine in front of a restaurant and was able to arrange its surprise arrival for the couple on their wedding day. "That was a pretty grand exit," Wirken says.

Wirken's story is illustrative of what the grand exit, or any other unique wedding activity, is really all about. A wedding celebration is the sum of meaningful and memorable moments, some of which become even more apparent as they're revisited over time.

Today, when Lindsay Reid looks through her wedding album, she sees much more than the bagpiper, her new husband in his dress kilt at her side and the procession of guests. Reid says it's funny that she can't even remember the 90-degree heat; instead she relives the "warmth and love from all of our friends and family" and the fact that "everybody had a good time."

About the author: Susan Jay is a freelance writer and independent marketing consultant. Her professional background includes extensive experience in broadcast journalism.

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