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How to plan your UAE wedding on a budget

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Excitement is noticeable in Souad Al Sabek's voice, and so is anxiety. It is just 12 days before her wedding in Dubai, and Ms Al Sabek does not want to go beyond Dh25,000 (US\$6,806) for the entire event.

She has made many of the accessories herself, such as favour bags for about 55 people, scouring Dragon Mart for the particular kind of bag to fit in with the rustic-themed wedding.

"I had the budget and then I decided on the number of people, items, decorations and adjusted them according to the budget," says Ms Al Sabek, a 23-year-old Syrian who works at a Dubai bank. She is chronicling her wedding preparations at www.mybridaldiary.net.

Weddings, no matter the budget, are a major business throughout the region. Upcoming events such as the Perfect Wedding Show in Sharjah next month and Bride Dubai in April only attest to this fact. There is great pressure for each couple and their families to put on overly-lavish celebrations, and many have run into debt arranging a fairytale wedding that is beyond what they can afford.

The expectations of what makes the perfect wedding ceremony vary with nationality. Emirati weddings have anywhere between 600 and 1,500 guests, whereas western expat couples have on average five to 100, with Indian weddings typically around the 400 to 700 guest mark, says Sarah Feyling, the managing director of Dubai-based Couture Events, which started in 2004.

Event organiser tips

While the basic minimum that Ms Feyling's clients spend on their weddings is Dh100,000, the most expensive she has handled has been Dh8 million. Here are some of her tips on where to cut costs:

- "I always ask our couples what their priority is, as generally this is where the money will go," Ms Feyling says. "For some it is the dress and others the entertainment; money can be saved in any area if the bride and groom are willing to compromise."
- Substitute artificial flowers for real flowers but only for those that are high up or out of reach of the guests
- Send email invitations instead of cards. Set up a wedding website to communicate the information online to your guests.
- Hire the wedding dress instead of buying one.
- Your guest's favours can also double up as your centrepiece, for example, potted plants.
- Instead of hiring a DJ, use your iPod and ask a trusted friend to manage it for the evening.

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