



# The rise of the PINK WEDDING

Emma Field investigates the triumphant rise of the gay wedding planner

**G**ay weddings are becoming big business. It seems that anyone who's anyone (who's not a mindless homophobe) is trying to cash in. And why not? Statistics show that the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act in December 2005 was hugely popular. The law gives gay couples the same rights

as straight ones and the year following its passing saw 18,059 civil partnership ceremonies take place.

Since then the rush to get hitched has naturally slowed as the large numbers of long-term gay and lesbian partners who had been looking to tie the knot for years have finally been able to do so. Among the

first were Sir Elton John and his partner of 12 years, David Furnish, who celebrated at the Windsor Guildhall in a celebrity-studded affair. Nevertheless, civil partnership ceremonies remain at a steady level and are here to stay.

If you're one of the thousands planning their own gay wedding, knowing where to



Pink Wedding's Gino with his partner Mike

Photograph: Alessandro Albert

## 'A gay wedding just won't neatly fit into the same format as a traditional heterosexual wedding'

start can be daunting. The straight wedding market is booming – a multi-million-pound industry churning out thousands and thousands of happy brides and grooms each year. But businesses specialising in the niche gay wedding sector are a little more elusive, and knowing where to get the best, most gay-friendly service for you can be daunting. Fortunately there are a number of dedicated people out there who genuinely want to help you have your perfect pink day, rather than just make a quick pink buck.

### The myth of the pink pound

"The pink pound is a myth. I really hate it," states Gino Meriano, founder of dedicated gay wedding firm Pink Weddings, emphatically. "If you're in a gay couple with good jobs, it's assumed you've got plenty of disposable income and therefore you're rich. Compare that to a straight couple with good jobs and no kids – it's just the same." He points out that in 2003 almost 40% of the retail and goods sector, including essential wedding services such as venues, photographers and caterers, were refusing their business to gay couples. Now many businesses claim to be gay-friendly, trying to piggy-back on the rise of the gay wedding.

Providing a service for the gay wedding market is not as easy as some might think. There are many differences between gay and straight weddings; it's not as simple as replacing 'bride and groom' with 'bride and bride' or 'groom and groom'. The wedding arrangement is necessarily different. There might not be a top table, for example; nor any bridal photography in the morning, and the couple usually plan the wedding themselves rather than the bride and her family taking over. A gay wedding just won't fit neatly into the same format as a traditional heterosexual marriage.

Add to this the fact that a normal budget given to Pink Weddings can be anywhere between £5,000 to £15,000 (the average cost of a straight wedding is about £18,000), and it becomes clear that any company trying to cash in on the so-called pink pound is going to be disappointed. As Gino points out, "It's a very niche market. You have to know what you're doing to make it work."

### The real pink crusaders

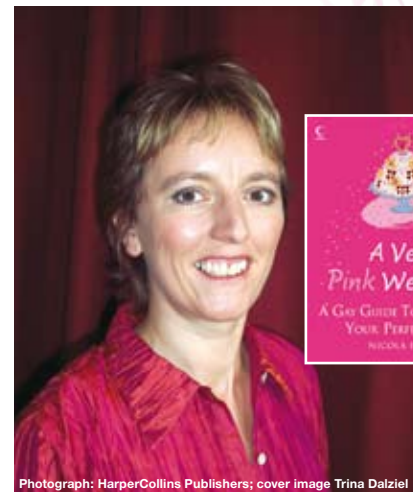
So how do you know which providers are really going to give you the service you want: not just marketing themselves as gay-friendly, but genuinely tuned in to the requirements and sensitivities of the gay

market? The 2006 Equality Act made it illegal to discriminate against people on the grounds of sexual orientation if providing a service. However, knowing when a company is catering for gay weddings because it is genuinely gay-friendly, as opposed to catering for gay weddings because it is illegal not to, is difficult. Fortunately, there are a number of trailblazers on hand to guide you through the planning process.

Nicola Hill, author of *A Very Pink Wedding: A Gay Guide to Planning Your Perfect Day*, which she wrote after her own wedding planning experience, says, "It can be alienating to read a guide which is littered with references to 'bride and groom' and doesn't take into account the monumental historical importance of civil partnerships." Her book is tailored exclusively to gay couples and is a step-by-step guide to the entire gay wedding process.

When researching a venue for her own wedding Nicola was explicit in her emails, saying it was for a civil partnership ceremony. "I wanted to be reassured that I wouldn't experience any homophobia," she says. To her disappointment, about 35% of venues didn't bother to reply and a few were downright rude. This prompted her to set up her own website, [www.gay-friendly-wedding-venues.com](http://www.gay-friendly-wedding-venues.com), which has been going strong for nearly three years and now boasts over 800 advertisers in its directory, plus an award for best start-up business in Hackney.

Gino also spotted a gap in the market when he was looking for some ideas for himself and his partner, Mike, in 2002. He set up Pink Weddings with a 30-page website which quickly took off, helping plan an "absolutely phenomenal" 200 gay commitment ceremonies in its first eight months. "What we created suddenly became an instigator as to how the market would be



Photograph: HarperCollins Publishers; cover image Trina Dalziel

Nicola Hill, author of *A Very Pink Wedding*

## Popular destinations for UK civil partnership ceremonies

|               |                      |
|---------------|----------------------|
| Manchester    | Brighton & Hove      |
| Westminster   | West Yorkshire       |
| West Midlands | Kensington & Chelsea |
| Kent          | Islington            |
| Surrey        | Hampshire            |

## About the Civil Partnership Act 2004

The Act allows same-sex couples aged 16 and over who form a civil partnership the same rights as married couples in the following areas:

- Tax, including inheritance
- Employment and bereavement benefits
- Most state and occupational pension benefits
- Income-related benefits, tax credits and child support
- Duty to provide reasonable maintenance for any children of the family
- Ability to apply for parental responsibility for your civil partner's child
- Inheritance of a tenancy agreement
- Recognition under intestacy rules
- Access to fatal accidents compensation
- Protection from domestic violence
- Recognition in the UK for immigration and nationality purposes
- Exemption from testifying against each other in a court of law
- Next-of-kin visiting rights in hospitals

From *A Very Pink Wedding: A Gay Guide to Planning Your Perfect Day* by Nicola Hill

## Gay weddings stats and facts

- There were 15,672 partnerships in the first nine months following the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act, according to the Office for National Statistics
- Almost 2,000 of these occurred in December 2005 when the Civil Partnership Act 2004 came into force
- Of these partnerships, 14,084 took place in England, 537 in Wales, 942 in Scotland and 109 in Northern Ireland
- More men than women have so far chosen civil partnerships, making up 62% of partnerships in England, 57% in Scotland, 56% in Northern Ireland and 51% in Wales. In London, there were three gay civil partnerships for every lesbian one. This gap appears to be slowly closing as time passes.

From [www.thepinkguide.co.uk](http://www.thepinkguide.co.uk)

dictated and how it would change," he says, referring to his subsequent influential campaigning work, consultation work on the civil partnership papers and help in training the registration service. Gino was involved with the 2006 Equality Act and Pink Weddings is the first port of call for any TV show planning to screen a gay wedding. He is a widely-acknowledged authority on gay weddings.

Pink Weddings offers its customers expertise in every area, from finding essential information on civil partnerships, to the day itself, and the honeymoon with its own gay travel agent, Travelling Pink. The whole process of planning a gay wedding is carefully taken care of, and this involves providing a buffer between their customers and any instances of homophobia they may encounter. To do this, Pink Weddings has created the concept of 'Pink Approved'. "What we offer is a partnership service. Our partners are extremely keen on supporting the gay community, not just being visible in it," says Gino. Unlike many gay wedding directory services, all the companies used by Pink Weddings understand

the differences between an opposite-sex wedding and a same-sex wedding. "And if anybody says there is no difference, that's a lie," adds Gino.

## How a gay-wedding planner can help

As well as guiding you through the minefield of finding a good gay-friendly wedding supplier, specialist gay wedding planners can talk you through all areas of this relatively new ceremony. Just knowing your rights can be tricky. Gay couples cannot currently get married in a religious venue, but there are a number of other options open. Specialist gay wedding planners would make sure you are aware of all choices available, from register offices to Interfaith Ministers. Also, it is essential to know exactly what the Civil Partnership Act means to you. Gino will tell couples everything they need to know face to face for free, and Nicola's book begins with a clear guide which outlines your rights and responsibilities, including an excellent section on FAQs.

## ‘The rule book is being written, torn up and re-written again and again. It’s a very exciting time to wed!’

In addition to making sure you are aware of the facts and small print, a gay wedding planner should be a source of inspiration. From the theme of the wedding to smaller details such as cake tops, each consideration involves making hundreds of choices. Gino’s enthusiasm is infectious. “The thing I love is that every single wedding is different. Even if the standard format is still there, when you turn around and say to a couple, ‘have you thought about maybe this...’, it suddenly explodes.” Nicola lists a number of ideas for themes in her book, from seasonal influences to gay symbols and icons. As she says, “You can really have some fun and let your imagination run wild – it’s your big gay day.”

Like Nicola, any gay wedding planner worth your hard-earned cash should be aware of all the issues a gay couple may face. “I think other people’s expectations can be challenging as straight family members or friends may have preconceived ideas about how a wedding should be organised. There may also be issues with

families who don’t approve of civil partnerships, so this can cause tension,” Nicola points out. She also advises couples not to invite anyone who has a problem with their sexuality to come to the wedding.

Areas that could really benefit from the help of a specialist gay wedding planner include: finding a gay-friendly venue; choosing a dressmaker who makes matching bridal dresses/morning suits or morning suits tailored for women; searching out his-and-his or hers-and-hers cake tops made in a style complementary to your wedding theme; putting you in touch with a honeymoon travel agent who is familiar with gay-tolerant destinations; finding a gay-friendly photographer; and basically catering for every request you may have!

### Gay wedding trends and traditions

The key thing about gay weddings is that there are no traditions to adhere to nor any precedent to follow. As Gino says, “The



Left: Sharing the spotlight – Pink Wedding’s dual aisle concept allows both women to walk down the aisle and be given away



Right: In the pink – be inspired and make the day truly your own

Photographs: [www.pinkweddings.biz](http://www.pinkweddings.biz)

Below: Nicola Hill and Laura McCaffrey on their wedding day

### Best gay honeymoon destinations

**Sydney, Australia**  
**Amsterdam, The Netherlands**  
**Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, Canada**  
**Key West, Florida**  
**Prague, Czech Republic**

**Mykonos, Greece**  
**Cape Town, South Africa**  
**Gran Canaria, Spain**  
**San Francisco, California**  
**Puerto Vallarta, Mexico**

Not all destinations are welcoming to lesbian and gay travellers. If you wish to feel comfortable and be able to hold hands in public on your honeymoon there are a number of destinations to avoid, including Jamaica, Dubai, Namibia, the Maldives, much of the Middle East and America’s ‘Bible Belt’.

Check the Foreign Office website ([www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)) for further information on destinations.



## Pink weddings

beauty is that it's such an open box anything goes." With a traditional straight wedding there is a tried and trusted formula; a gay wedding can adapt as many or as few of these traditional elements as required or invent its own rules. Best man, bridesmaids, maid of honour, smart outfits, the first dance, toasts, cake, stag and hen nights, ring fingers – all of these traditions may be borrowed from the straight wedding, or altered to be less gender-specific, or simply got rid of altogether. The rule book is being written, torn up and re-written again and again. It's a very exciting time to wed!

Of course, certain parts of a traditional wedding must be included: the ceremony, the signing, the presence of witnesses and some kind of celebration, whether it's just for the pair of you or for guests too. But certain things must be altered. For example, at a lesbian wedding, both brides may have fathers who wish to give them away. To this end, Pink Weddings has introduced the

'two-aisle concept' so that both women can be walked down the aisle, both equally enjoying their share of the spotlight.

One area where it is possible to detect a growing trend is the use of toastmasters. While still popular, the traditional toastmaster is being replaced by female toastmasters and drag queens. "In the last year and a half," says Gino, "drag queens have overtaken toastmasters because they are phenomenal at what they do: they are incredible MCs; they have razor-sharp tongues; they know when to behave themselves and during quiet times they entertain the guests. It is incredible to watch."

Gay symbols and icons are also fashionable on the gay wedding scene. Nicola Hill suggests couples choose a theme based on a recognisable gay symbol, a gay icon or annual Pride festivals, or camp it up ("think feathers, flamingos, drag kings and queens"). Era themes, such as 1920s flapper girls or 60s swingers, are also great ideas.

## What's next for gay weddings?

It is estimated that by 2010 nearly 22,000 gay marriages will have taken place in the UK. There are a huge number of innovations going on and the gay wedding market is opening up in ways unimaginable 10 years ago. The Gay Wedding Show, (Gino's brainchild), will celebrate its fifth show in October 2008 and 2007 saw its greatest number of visitors so far. Yet Gino doesn't want the show to grow too much. "The bigger it gets, the more impersonal it becomes," he says. To get around this problem he currently vets each exhibitor himself and is very discriminating about who he allows to join the show.

Each year there are around 60 exhibitors and 500 people come along to check them out. Rather than move to larger and larger venues, Gino moves the show around the country to places such as Manchester, Brighton and Cardiff, and changes about

**Organising a real rainbow for the big day might be tricky, but gay symbols and icons are fashionable themes on the gay wedding scene**



The Gay Wedding Show 2007

Photograph: Mark Whittaker



Photograph: Andy Webb

**Drag queen Fonda Cox (geddit?!):  
MC extraordinaire**

‘By mixing the format up a bit, gay wedding planners are finding a number of emerging gay wedding trends that could cross-over successfully’

80% of the exhibitors annually. He wants to approach the gay wedding sector from a different angle each year so that new exhibitors bring in something fresh. Anyone can exhibit, so long as they have something new to offer. “It’s not over-the-top, flamboyant or outrageously gay,” he is careful to point out. Last year, for example, the rainbow rose proved highly popular.

Many innovations make their way into the market this way. After seeing that couples wanted wedding albums in colours other than black or white, Gino launched Fierte ([www.fierte.co.uk](http://www.fierte.co.uk)). Filling a yawning chasm in the market, Fierte is a range of coloured wedding albums that allow couples to continue their wedding colour theme right through to the album. There is also a colourful range of digital albums and the world’s first iAlbum, designed to hold

an iPod nano-full of the best pictures and videos of the day.

Gino hopes that Fierte will do well in the straight market too, and by mixing the format up a bit gay wedding planners are finding a number of emerging gay wedding trends that could cross over successfully. Enlivening toastmasters, speeches for both partners and multiple ceremonies to get as many people involved as possible are just a few. Perhaps the best crossover idea is to bring in entertainment for the guests (such as a magician, Latin dancers or even simply cake and champagne) while the newly-weds’ post-ceremony photos are being taken. As Gino candidly says, “I would kill myself if I ever had to go to a wedding and stand around for an hour and a half freezing again.” Look and learn, people, look and learn! **BM**

## Useful sources



*A Very Pink Wedding: A Gay Guide to Planning Your Perfect*

*Day* by Nicola Hill: everything from proposing to honeymooning, including budget advice, timeline planner and inspiration for wedding themes



[www.gay-friendly-wedding-venues.com](http://www.gay-friendly-wedding-venues.com): Nicola Hill’s excellent directory service and information about planning your gay wedding



[www.pinkweddings.biz](http://www.pinkweddings.biz): award-winning website from Pink Weddings helps you find out everything you need to know and more, as well as putting you in touch with its carefully vetted recommended partners



[www.civilvenuesuk.com](http://www.civilvenuesuk.com): search facility for all register offices and places licenced to hold weddings, from stately homes and historic buildings to racecourses, football clubs and the London Eye



[www.fierte.co.uk](http://www.fierte.co.uk): a great range of coloured wedding albums, CD holders and the world’s first iAlbum, inspired by Pink Weddings and crafted by Spicer Hallfield



[www.pinkpassport.co.uk](http://www.pinkpassport.co.uk): travel company covering gay hotels and honeymoons to Curaçao, working in partnership with Lastminute.com



[www.lavenderlifestyles.co.uk/acatalog/Civil\\_Partnership.html](http://www.lavenderlifestyles.co.uk/acatalog/Civil_Partnership.html): wide range of civil partnership cards, gifts and stationery



[www.thepinkguide.co.uk](http://www.thepinkguide.co.uk): information about civil partnerships and a directory arranged so you can easily find gay-friendly local services and suppliers



[www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/civilpartnerships/index.asp](http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/civilpartnerships/index.asp): official information for England and Wales about civil partnerships, venues, costs, registering a civil partnership abroad and more



[www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/registering-a-civil-partnership-in-scotland.html](http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/registering-a-civil-partnership-in-scotland.html): official information for civil partnerships in Scotland



[www.groni.gov.uk](http://www.groni.gov.uk): official guidance on forming a civil partnership in Northern Ireland



[www.theinterfaithseminary.com](http://www.theinterfaithseminary.com): find an Interfaith minister to give a tailor-made spiritual or religious edge to your ceremony



[www.weddingchaos.co.uk](http://www.weddingchaos.co.uk): carries articles and up-to-date wedding news for extra inspiration