



By HATTY LIU
The World of Chinese

Newlywed bride Wu started each morning of her two-day vacation in Prague with wake-up calls at 4 am. Before noon, she and her husband had held hands on the Charles Bridge, sat with swans by the Vltava River, and kissed on the Prague Castle grounds. She wore a rented white gown; he wore a tuxedo. And they smiled again and again for bemused tourists.

Two professional photographers were hired to document every moment.

Around 11 am the rigorous regimen paused, to get past the photographically unfriendly midday light and growing crowds, before resuming from late afternoon to sundown — as late as 9 pm in some areas of Europe during summer.

The schedule left Wu, from Southwest China's Sichuan province, with little time for sightseeing or relaxation, but she has no regrets.

"I liked the background of red-roofed houses," she said. "It's what we wanted for our wedding photos (婚纱照, hūn shā zhào)."

An authentic Bohemian background does not come cheap for newlyweds like Wu, who asked to be identified only by her surname. She also declined to say exactly how much she paid for her entourage.

A search of online marketplace Taobao showed prices from 20,000 to 100,000 yuan (\$2,880 to \$14,400) for wedding gown travel photography (婚纱旅拍, hūn shā lǚ pāi) in Prague. The Czech capital is one of the top destinations for such photo shoots on the Pinterest-like social media platform Little Red Book (小红书, xiǎo hóng shū).

Wu and her husband met up with their Chinese photographers and makeup artist locally, but some couples pay more to bring their

own photographer or videographer on a custom multicity itinerary. Others splurge on an all-inclusive tour: transportation, hotel, costume rental, language assistance and a local guide.

Destination photo shoots may be one reason that China's wedding photography market is still growing at a steady rate of 1 to 2 percent per year, although marriage rates have declined since 2013.

By 2023, the industry is expected to be worth 63.7 billion yuan — even though by then it is estimated that only 60 percent as many marriages will take place compared with the number a decade ago.

It is not clear when or how travel photography (旅拍, lǚ pāi) became trendy, but its rise is definitely recent. A common explanation cites Taiwan pop singer Jay Chou, whose wedding photos from Prague in 2014 led, so it is said, to an increase in white-clad early risers posing on the Charles Bridge.

Liu Xiaoying, a photographer in Guangzhou, South China's Guangdong province, recalled that when she and her husband started their studio, A Plus Film, in 2014, destination shoots were uncommon. To attract business, they called up wedding planning companies and slashed their fees.

Today, though, the two photographers spend an average 180 days a year abroad, traveling to meet couples at a dozen iconic destinations — Paris, Prague, Italy's Cinque Terre, and the Indonesian island of Bali. Turkey is this year's new hot travel photography country, according to Liu.

"It's the most popular location on Little Red Book. It's considered mysterious and exotic compared with some parts of Europe where lots of people have gone," she said. "The trips are definitely about trends and competition. People are influenced to go on them because their friends have been."

Wu believes the recent vogue for destination wedding photography is generational. "Older people were used to taking photos in a studio, but my generation prefers more spontaneous shots and outdoor settings," she said.

Across China, these feelings have sent hordes of newlyweds to pose in former colonial concessions — such as Gulangyu Island in East China's Fujian province and Shanghai's Bund — and areas with imitation European architecture, such as Tianjin's Florence Town housing district or the World Park in Beijing.

But traditional Chinese architecture has also grabbed newlyweds' attention. In 2015, the Imperial Ancestral Temple (太庙, tài miào) outside Beijing's Palace Museum, aka the Forbidden City (紫禁城, zǐ jìn chéng), even began charging 800 yuan for wedding shoots, saying the

Love is where you picture it

Wedding photography market booms as Chinese newlyweds celebrate in exotic destinations

fee is to compensate for the inconvenience caused to other visitors.

Opinions about Chinese couples' architectural tastes are divided. "As a Chinese person ... wedding photos in Japan, Europe or the United States feel too hackneyed; the person doesn't match the scenery," opined one newlywed, who opted to take photos in the Forbidden City. The comment appeared in a travel diary on Mafengwo, a website where people share their travel notes. For others, it is less about the nationality of the backdrop than the authenticity.

"The local color and enjoyment of travel are not things you can replicate," Liu said.

Most of her clients have had experience of visiting or studying in foreign countries, which helps when applying for visas.

"As the Chinese economy improves, the cost of traveling abroad gets lower, especially compared with traveling domestically," Liu said. Round-trip airfare to Europe can be as low as 3,000 yuan, while flights within China sometimes exceed 2,000 yuan.

Then one has to consider the quality of the experience.

"At many Chinese destinations, though it's beautiful, the infrastructure isn't there for a good tourism experience, compared with European countries," Liu said.

"There's something emotionally fulfilling about visiting a developed country and seeing the world, seeing the diverse architecture and cultures, the locals congratulating you as they pass by. The clients get a lot of enjoyment."

For Wu, a destination shoot was simply more interesting than going to a studio or a replica. "We want to be able to look back on our wedding photos later to bring back memories," she said.

She admitted, though, that her photographic itinerary was not conducive to soaking up local color. "After Prague, we went to Austria for a few days. Just us, just sightseeing — no cameras"

Courtesy of The World of Chinese, www.theworldofchinese.com.cn

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Chinese couples who have wedding pictures taken at famous places often attract stares from locals and other tourists.

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