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Always a Bridesmaid is Freaking Expensive

By Sarah Pascarella (/blog/author/sarahpascarella?page=3) on 5/13/2017



Between the bridal shower, bachelorette party, gifts, a bridesmaid's dress, a professional updo—the cost of being a bridesmaid can really add up. Here's how to keep costs down (or bow out of the wedding entirely).

I've been a bridesmaid nine times.

Nine.

Times.

That's a lot of dresses, made-to-order dyed shoes, bridal showers, bachelorette parties, updos, travel, and gifts. And while I'd love to tell you I was able to do each on a budget, that wouldn't be the truth.

A few years back, I started calculating what I had spent on other people's weddings, hit a certain nausea-inducing threshold, and just stopped.

So, real talk: Weddings are notoriously expensive, even (maybe especially) for the wedding party. But like any Grownup milestone, you can keep costs manageable with proper planning—or some tough conversations.

Planning Ahead

If you've been asked to be a bridesmaid, it's ideal to have as much advance notice for what's expected of you for the big day and the months leading up to it. Once you know whether your obligations will be grand or intimate, you can start discussions with the bride, groom, families, and wedding party and figure out an anticipated budget.

When I thought back over my many times as a bridesmaid, a few common elements stood out. Here are the primary expenses to consider for your wedding party budget:

Bridal Shower

Who's throwing it and what's involved? Will it be a low-key or upscale affair? Budget for invitations, food, drink, activities, decorations, and favors. If time allows and people are willing, take advantage of any talented makers in the wedding party: If you have any chefs, artists, decorators, and/or event planners, see if you can go (partially) DIY. You'll also want to budget for a gift; determine whether you'll be getting a solo gift or if all the bridesmaids will split a larger item together. And if you have to travel to go to the shower, budget extra for transportation, accommodations, and meals on the road.

Bachelorette Party

Similar to the bridal shower, how big of a party are we talking about here? I've gone to pull-out-all-the-stops bachelorette parties in New York City *and* super-laid-back afternoon tea or wine tasting parties in small towns, based on the bride. I typically approach the bachelorette party with a ballpark budget, considering travel, accommodations, meals, and activities, with a little buffer thrown in for unexpected expenses (like a last call at one—or several—bars, a tip for the limo driver, or taxi fares, for example). In lieu of a gift, plan on spending a little extra across the party to cover the bride's costs (meals, drinks, activity entrance fees, etc.). You may also want to prep for tchotchkes and favors, if that's expected at the party.

I've also had brides request a color theme for the party itself (e.g., all the bridesmaids wear blue). So if you have a similar experience, you may want to budget a little extra for new clothes. When I've had this request, I've tried to go with options that I'll actually wear again, so I'm not just purchasing a once-and-done outfit.

Bridesmaid Dress and Shoes

I've had several brides tell me to "just wear a black dress"—but definitely don't bank on this happening. In most cases, budget for the bridesmaid's dress itself and at least one round of alterations. Find out in advance if you'll need to purchase shoes, too.

Hair and Makeup

Confession: I'm terrible at hair styling and wear minimal makeup. So for weddings, I typically budget for an updo or blowout, and ask a friend to help on the makeup side.

Travel

Here's where you may have some wiggle room: Find out the dates for the shower, bachelorette party, and wedding as early as possible, so you can start tracking prices for airfare and accommodations and get the best deal. Take advantage of travel alerts and get prices sent right to your smartphone or email, and book when you see a price that suits your budget. Don't assume that the wedding's hotel room block gets you the best room price; shop around to see if you can get a better deal at that hotel (or at another property close by). Use vacation rentals to your advantage (especially for the shower and bachelorette party): The more people you have to split a per-night rate, the more affordable it will be.

Gifts

Almost done, but not quite! You'll want to have a gift for the bridal shower and the wedding day itself, choosing from gifts off the registry, selecting something not on the registry (going rogue!), making a gift, or writing a check. You'll also have some wiggle room here, as well as the option to chip in with other members of the wedding party.

Bottom line? It's not unusual to shell out several hundred (or even thousand) as a bridesmaid, especially if travel is involved. If that's not in your budget... it's time to start talking.

Have the Money Talk

So, based on the list above, you may determine that being a bridesmaid may not be financially feasible for you. Don't panic! This is where communication and transparency come in.

Here are some sample scripts for how to have *the talk*.

If there's wiggle room:

I'm really honored that you asked me to be in your wedding, and am so excited to be part of your big day. Before I commit, though, I wanted to get a sense of what you're hoping for from the bridal party... I'd hate to say yes and then realize it's not financially feasible for me.

Hooray for your engagement! Thank you so much for asking me to be a bridesmaid. As you may know, I'm [working to pay off my student loan debt/looking for a new job/paying off a credit card], and, in order to make sure I can swing it, I was hoping you could tell me about what being your bridesmaid would entail.

If you know you can't afford it:

Thank you for asking me to be your bridesmaid! I'm so flattered and excited for you. Unfortunately, because of [my damn student loans/I'm studying for the bar/insert your reason here], I won't be able to give you the full commitment you deserve. Let's meet for coffee soon and we can discuss more in person.

Remember: Conversations, first and foremost. If you don't know what the expectations are, you can't plan. The more you know in advance, the more you can budget (or have the conversation to opt out).



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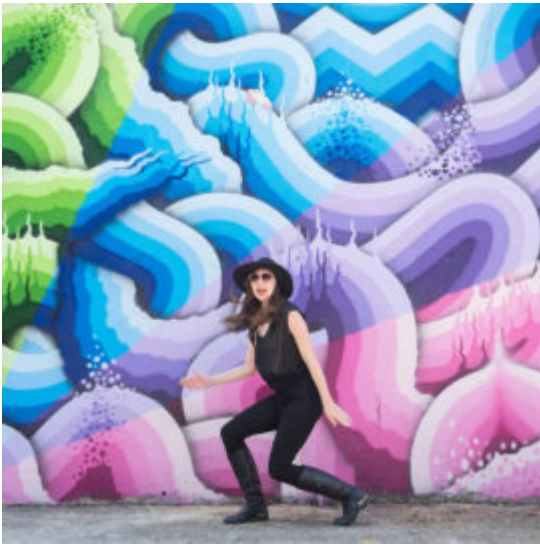
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