

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Caribbean Wedding Destinations Suffer Because Of Zika Virus

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ST. CROIX -- Caribbean wedding destinations have taken a hit this year because of the Zika virus, according to the [New York Times](#). The publication, citing multiple wedding planners as sources, cited one instance where JoAnn Gregoli, a wedding planner at Elegant Occasions, watched the guest list for one wedding on the Caribbean island of Anguilla melt from 150 to 100 in a matter of weeks. She said that she helped another couple, marrying in Mexico, improvise when a pregnant member of the party was ordered to stay home by her doctor.

The U.S. Virgin Islands has served as a popular wedding destination for many looking to tie the knot in the Caribbean, and the Department of Tourism in October [moved to](#)

[enhance the experience](#) by partnering with leading wedding dress manufacturer Mon Cheri Bridals to bring more weddings and honeymoon experiences to the islands.

“As the official bridal manufacturer for the United States Virgin Islands, bringing exposure to the territory as a choice destination for weddings and honeymoons is of pivotal importance,” said Stephen Lang, CEO of Mon Cheri Bridals.

But the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico have been hit with numerous cases of the virus, with 26 confirmed cases here and over 1,200 cases in Puerto Rico. Additionally, the aforementioned U.S. territories are the only two parts of the U.S. to have known local transmission. In the U.S.V.I., a majority of the cases are local transmissions, according to Territorial Epidemiologist Dr. Esther Ellis, speaking with The Consortium by telephone recently.

According to The Times, Hayley Hines, a 30-year-old Arizona resident, was expecting to be married in Cancún, Mexico, on June 18, with 110 friends and relatives in attendance at a beachside resort. She and her fiancé, Bryan Ahearn, had attended friends' weddings in that area and wanted the same experience.

The event was booked and practically paid for. Then a guest who was trying to become pregnant backed out; she was concerned that Mexico had reported some cases of Zika, a virus blamed for birth defects. “We’re at the age where people are having their first or second child,” Ms. Hines said.

In February, the bride-to-be discovered that she, too, was expecting, and would have to bow out. Becky Gillespie, the travel consultant who had spent months arranging the wedding, remembered thinking, “Oh, this is going to be a lot of work for nothing.” She spent weeks jumping through hoops with American Airlines, United Airlines and Sandos Cancún Luxury Experience Resort until she was able to return every penny of the \$15,300 Ms. Hines and her guests had already paid

The vendors “did not like it but they understood the situation,” said Ms. Gillespie, who operates For Love of Travel, an agency in Nevada City, Calif. She was “surprised that they let more than just the bride get their money back.”

The virus is of greatest concern to anyone who may be [pregnant](#) or may plan to have children after exposure. If saying your vows in a Zika-affected country means “you’re going to lose your sister because she’s pregnant and can’t go, that’s a problem,” said Annie Lee, a wedding planner. Some couples are keeping the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention phone number, 800-232-4636, next to those of their wedding planner and caterer, according to The Times.

Zika is spread primarily through the bite of an infected *Aedes* species mosquito. The most common symptoms of Zika are fever, rash, joint pain, and conjunctivitis (red eyes). The illness is usually mild with symptoms lasting for several days to a week after being bitten by an infected mosquito. People usually don’t get sick enough to go to the hospital, and they very rarely die of Zika. For this reason, many people might not realize they have been infected or may be infected and have no symptoms. Zika can also be spread sexually.

The World Health Organization and the C.D.C. have urged pregnant women against travel to more than 45 countries in which the Zika virus is spreading, mostly in the Caribbean and Latin America. All pregnant women who have been to these regions should be tested for the infection, health officials have said, and should refrain from unprotected sex with partners who have visited these regions.

The Zika virus has been linked to unusually small heads and brain damage in newborns — called microcephaly — in children born to infected mothers, as well as blindness, deafness, seizures and other congenital defects. In adults, the virus is linked to a form of temporary paralysis, called Guillain-Barré syndrome.

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