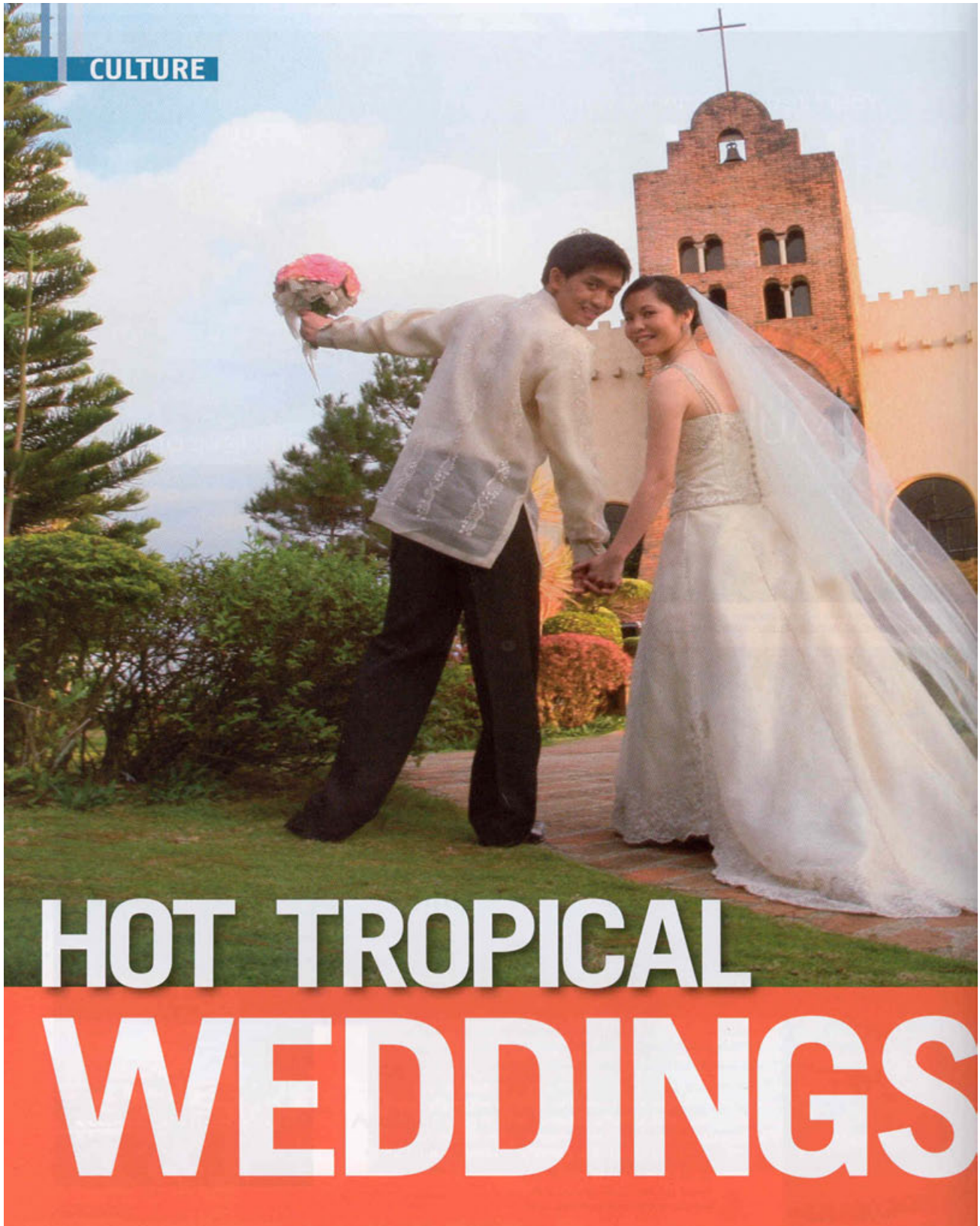
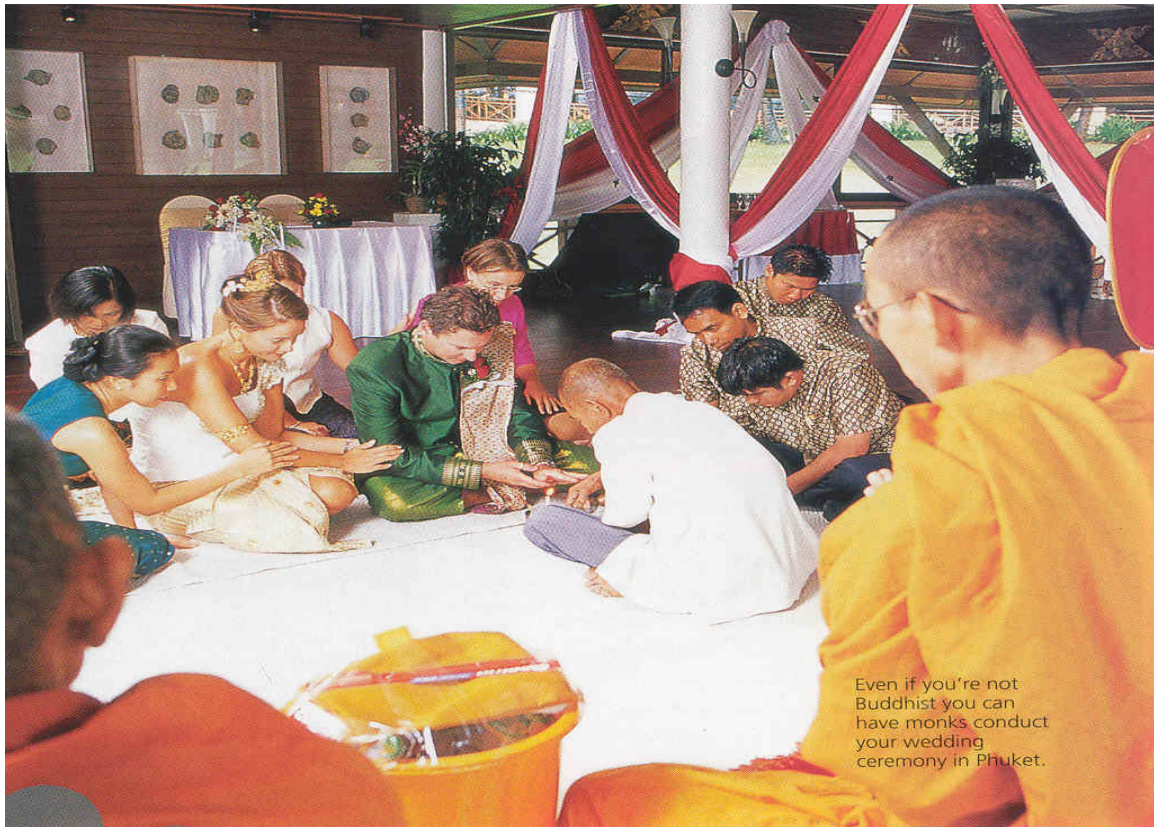


Publication: Tiger Airways Magazine	Date: May/June/July 06	Page: 56,63-64
Subject: Getting married at Laguna Wedding Chapel.	Country: Singapore	Circulation: 12,000/issue

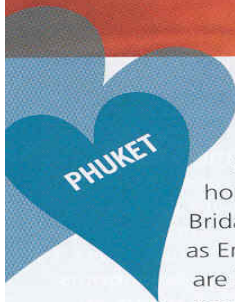


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Even if you're not Buddhist you can have monks conduct your wedding ceremony in Phuket.



Phuket is becoming more popular as a wedding and honeymoon destination. Bridal couples from as far as England and Australia are keen to wed amid the romance of Thai culture in such stunning natural surroundings.

LOCAL WEDDINGS

In modern Buddhist Thailand, girls are married after education is complete – usually around the age of 21.

Engagements can vary from a few months to a few years before a wedding. Generally, it is the parents who discuss the wedding arrangements. The bride's parents are expected to pay for the ceremonial celebrations and token gifts for guests. Traditionally a *sin sod* (bride price) is paid by the groom to the bride's family but this is becoming rather outdated.

The traditional wedding ceremony begins at dawn with a monk's feast, followed by the groom's beating-drum procession to the home of the bride. The bride's family performs a feet washing ceremony before he enters through symbolic barriers of "golden gate" and "silver gate" – pieces of string held by children.

The bride will be wearing a traditional gown with long sleeves, or with one bare shoulder, and golden costume jewellery.

Matrimonial beds are usually decorated with red sheets, flowers and coins for fertility and good luck

FOREIGN CEREMONIES

On Phuket, rites (both traditional Buddhist and western religious), elephants, wedding attire, photography, flowers and champagne, lavish spa sessions, yachts, and scenic or adventurous daytrips can be arranged by the hotels. If you aren't Buddhist but love the grace and charm of a Buddhist ceremony, you can have one arranged.

Ceremonies can be performed beneath a sweetly-scented arch of tropical blooms on a stunning Andaman beach. Novelty weddings such as underwater ceremonies for diving couples are also popular here.

Dutch couple Tristan and Leonie legally married in Holland, decided to endorse their union with a ceremony in Phuket. While the couple sailed around Phuket, Phang Nga and Krabi with friends, Mark Briet of Phuket-weddings.com arranged to transport the wedding cake, flowers and decorations to a secluded island beach near Phi Phi Island. They combined a fun vacation with friends and a casual, dream wedding.

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WALKING DOWN THE ISLE

Island resorts are attracting a fair share of the wedding market offering western style or traditional Buddhist ceremonies with up to nine monks performing the marriage blessing led by a long drum parade. The ceremony is usually followed by the planting of a love-tree for good luck.

The Racha, a five-star island resort on Koh Racha Yai offers a distinctive alternative to the love-tree – a reef ball is planted in the coral beds offshore as part of the resort's coral rehabilitation project. The concrete reef ball will eventually be covered by colourful corals and become home to many marine species.

The Laguna Phuket Resorts group recently opened Phuket's first wedding chapel – the charming Chapel On The Lagoon – that floats on stilts. Western or Thai style ceremonies can be arranged. Thai weddings feature Buddhist monk blessings, Thai musicians, attendants in traditional Thai costumes, optional elephants and various touches to add a truly exotic flavour.

The Mangosteen Resort & Spa (www.mangosteen-phuket.com) played host to the western wedding ceremony of Hong Kong-based couple Melanie Braithwaite and Hamish Miers. Instead of bothering with Thai marriage legalities, the couple decided to first marry at a Hong Kong registry office, allowing friends unable to travel to the Phuket wedding, to attend the Hong Kong ceremony. Their Phuket ceremony was graced by 80 friends from around the globe.

CAN TOURISTS GET MARRIED IN PHUKET?

Yes. Visit your embassy in Bangkok at least six working days before the wedding with your passports. If you are widowed or divorced, you also need to bring the necessary papers.

REPORTED BY **KERRIE HALL** **TIGER TALES**

End.