



THE ULTIMATE ELOPEMENT PLANNING GUIDE & CHECKLIST

HOW TO PLAN YOUR ELOPEMENT



THERE AREN'T MANY COUPLES BRAVE ENOUGH TO CONSIDER
ELOPING INSTEAD OF HAVING A BIG TRADITIONAL WEDDING.

SO IF YOU'RE READING THIS, CONGRATS ON BEING PRETTY BADASS.

Eloping means that all of the wedding day choices you have to make, are yours entirely. There are no rules. You can truly make your day any adventure you want—it can be a day that reflects the two of you instead of being focused on everyone else's needs, opinions, and expectations.

All of this freedom to plan your dream day can feel a bit overwhelming.

So as a team of experienced elopement photographers & guides (who have all eloped ourselves) we (Maddie Mae, Amber, Tori, & Bessie) have put together this [Ultimate Elopement Planning Guide & Checklist](#) to help guide you through the planning process.



BEFORE WE DIVE IN... LET'S GO OVER SOME QUICK
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT ELOPEMENTS

WHAT IS AN ELOPEMENT?

Elopement planning is not necessarily a linear process with clear, consecutive steps. It happens in stages.

As with climbing most mountains, there are many ways to the top—but if you feel lost, follow this guide.

HOW LONG DO I NEED TO PLAN?

We have seen couples successfully plan incredible elopements anywhere from 2 years out to 1 week out.

The average length of planning time is about 4-10 months. This gives you time to book flights at good prices and find the best lodging.

HOW MUCH DOES ELOPING COST?

The U.S. national average for a traditional wedding is \$34,000, but you can have an incredibly rad elopement for less than half of that. Expect to spend 50-80% of your budget on photography and the rest on travel, attire, rings, flowers, hair & makeup, an officiant, food, activities, and your marriage license.

CAN OTHER PEOPLE COME?

Absolutely! An “elopement” is defined by intentionally focusing your wedding day on YOU TWO (the couple). If you have close family & friends that are on board with your vision and want to support & celebrate with you—go for it. We have been to elopements with up to 25 people with the same vibe as a 2-person elopement.

THE 5 STAGES OF ELOPEMENT PLANNING

Elopement planning is not necessarily a linear process with clear, consecutive steps. It happens in stages. As with climbing most mountains, there are many ways to the top—but if you feel lost, follow this guide.



STAGE 1

DREAM & BRAINSTORM

DREAM & BRAINSTORM

All the best plans start with a quality brainstorming session. One of the best things about eloping is that you can truly go to the most awe-inspiring places in the world to say your vows.

**SO... IF YOU COULD GO ANYWHERE
IN THE WORLD TO GET MARRIED...
WHERE WOULD YOU GO?**

The goal of the dreaming & brainstorming stage is to form an overall vision for your day including a general area of the world and time of year you would like to elope.

A couple in wedding attire are running through a field of tall, golden-brown grass. The woman is wearing a white lace wedding dress with a long train, and the man is wearing a dark suit. They are holding hands and looking towards the right. In the background, there are rolling hills and a range of mountains with significant snow cover under a cloudy sky.

ADVENTURE
INSTEAD

HOW TO BRAINSTORM - 3 TIPS

GET IN A RELAXED SPACE

The best way to dream & brainstorm is to sit down with your partner some place comfortable and imagine your perfect elopement day from start to finish. Try doing it on your favorite date night, or cuddled up at home with your favorite beverage.

KEEP AN OPEN MIND

The dreaming & brainstorming stage is not about getting bogged down in details, what's possible or not, or what's realistic.

It's ok to keep your ideas vague. Have fun imagining all the possibilities.

YOU CAN FIND INSPIRATION ANYWHERE

To help yourself plan, get inspired, and excited about new ideas, use Pinterest, Instagram, travel guides, books, Google Earth Pro or maps.

WHEN YOU'RE BRAINSTORMING ABOUT YOUR DREAM ELOPEMENT DAY...

ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS

1

WHAT IS THE OVERALL MEANING AND INTENTION OF YOUR DAY?

Is this day just for the two of you? Do others play a role in your day?

2

WHAT DOES THE SCENERY LOOK LIKE?

Are you in the mountains, desert, on a cliff, in a forest, in front of a waterfall, or on the beach?

3

WHAT SEASON IS IT?

Do you prefer cold or warm weather? Do you imagine there being snow, or fall colors? Do you two enjoy hot or cold weather?

4

HOW MUCH TIME ARE YOU ABLE TO USE FOR THE TRIP?

Is the elopement day part of a larger trip or combined with your honeymoon? How much time are you able to take off from work?

5

WILL IT BE JUST THE TWO OF YOU? OR WILL YOU INCLUDE OTHERS?

This will help determine any permits you will need or accessibility concerns.

6

WHAT DOES THE CEREMONY LOOK LIKE?

Are there important cultural or religious traditions you'd like to incorporate into the ceremony?

7

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO WEAR?

A dress or suit? Something more casual? Are you wearing shoes - or not? If it's cold, will you need to wear extra layers? What footwear do you need?

8

WHAT ACTIVITIES DO YOU SEE YOURSELVES DOING?

These can be activities that you enjoy doing together or ones you've never tried before. Hiking, stargazing, stand up paddleboarding?

DO YOU HAVE A VISION OF WHAT YOUR DAY LOOKS LIKE NOW?

HOWEVER FUZZY IT IS, THAT'S A GREAT PLACE TO START!

At some point during Stage 1 or Stage 2 is when most couples choose to contact us as elopement photographers and guides. We love helping couples turn their “fuzzy” vision into a concrete plan with our extensive elopement experience, travel knowledge, location suggestions, and planning tools!

If you don't have a photographer that's able to help you with planning and logistics for your elopement, consider hiring a local wedding planner.



STAGE 2

RESEARCH & LOGISTICS

RESEARCH & LOGISTICS

Once you've come up with the overall vision for your day, Stage 2 is all about digging deep into research and figuring out what's feasible.

Your goal with this research is to make your adventure elopement vision a reality in the best way possible. This will allow you to start finalizing details.

WHAT IF I HATE RESEARCHING?

Don't worry! This isn't a term paper—this is fun!

Just like with Stage 1, we suggest creating a relaxed and fun environment to enjoy this process. Sit on your patio or couch with your laptops or phones—or go hang out in the travel book section of a bookstore after a coffee date and enjoy.

And if you get stuck, remember there are lots of people you could hire to help you (like a knowledgeable photographer, a wedding planner, a local guide, etc).

As elopement photographers & guides, Stage 2 tends to be where we help couples the most with their planning process. We'd be happy to help you!

HOW TO RESEARCH - 3 TIPS

DIG DEEP

Do as much research as possible, and dig as deep as you can. It's better to know now if there's some logistical issue with weather, seasonal closures, accessibility, timing, or something else that would affect your dream day. It's best to discover these things before making final decisions & booking (in Stage 3).

STAY POSITIVE

Don't get discouraged if you find that some of the ideas you dreamed up in Stage 1 end up not being feasible. Keep looking for alternatives and enjoy the process of finding "your spot" for your amazing day. Elopements are all about being flexible & spontaneous.

ASK FOR HELP

If you get really stuck, find a guide to help you! If you don't have an experienced and knowledgeable photographer, ask friends who have travelled to your dream spot, ask others on social media, contact a local guide company, or contact a local wedding planner.



AS YOU'RE DIGGING INTO RESERACH, MAKE SURE YOU LOOK INTO THESE IMPORTANT LOGISTICS TO CONSIDER

1

WHAT ARE THE LOCAL MARRIAGE LAWS & REQUIREMENTS?

2

DO YOU WANT OTHER PEOPLE TO BE THERE?

3

HOW ACCESSIBLE IS YOUR SITE?
HOW WILL YOU GET THERE?

4

WHAT KIND OF ACTIVITIES DO YOU WANT TO DO?

5

DO YOU WANT TO DO SOME SORT OF CELEBRATORY MEAL/DRINK?

6

WHAT IS THE WEATHER LIKE?
HOW DO YOU NEED TO PREPARE?

7

HOW BUSY/SECLUDED IS YOUR CHOSEN CEREMONY LOCATION?

8

DO YOU NEED A PERMIT TO A HAVE A CEREMONY OR PHOTOS?

9

DO YOU WANT TO DO A "FIRST LOOK"?

10

WHAT VENDORS DO YOU NEED?
HOW EASY ARE THEY TO FIND?

A photograph of a wedding ceremony taking place in a dense forest. A bride in a white lace dress and a groom in a light grey suit are holding hands and facing each other. An officiant in a light grey suit stands to the left, holding a book. A bridesmaid in a dark blue dress stands to the right, holding a bouquet of flowers. The background is filled with tall, thin evergreen trees.

ADVENTURE
INSTEAD

DIGGING INTO MARRIAGE LAWS

MARRIAGE LAWS VARY A LOT BY STATE AND COUNTRY

You'll want to make sure you can legally get married, wherever you're planning to do it. You'll need to know what paper work you need before and after. Depending on your location, you may need an officiant and witnesses.

BUT DON'T LET PAPERWORK KEEP YOU FROM HAVING THE DAY OF YOUR DREAMS!

If the logistics of getting a marriage license signed in the place you intend to elope seem complicated, keep in mind that completing the legal paperwork at home is also an option. In our experience, 75% of our couples having a destination elopement choose to complete the paperwork before or after their elopement day. By doing this, their day is not affected by paperwork, where an officiant won't go, or where they can find witnesses.

YOU GET MARRIED ON THE DAY YOU SAY YOUR VOWS AND COMMIT YOUR LIFE TO YOUR PARTNER.

DIGGING INTO PERMITS & REGULATIONS

LEGALITIES & ETHICS

When narrowing in on the exact spot that you want to say your vows, make sure to consider if it's legal and ethical to have a wedding ceremony there. There are some locations that have laws or rules against having any type of ceremony, and some places where having a wedding ceremony wouldn't be appropriate.

DO YOU NEED A PERMIT?

Most public lands and private properties require a permit to have a wedding ceremony. Many also require one for your photographer to photograph there. The general rule is to assume you need permission unless told otherwise—and remember that rules and restrictions can change without notice.

“LEAVE NO TRACE” PRINCIPLES

Make sure to follow all 7 Leave No Trace principles during your outdoor adventure elopement. Leave the gorgeous scenery untouched, and make sure to not travel or have your ceremony on a fragile environment.





DIGGING INTO WEATHER & SEASONS

HIGH & LOW SEASON

Some locations have a “high” and “low” season which can impact how secluded your elopement location will be. This can also affect local pricing for lodging and food. Contact a local, ranger, or guide for information on when it’s best to visit your location.

WHAT IF THE WEATHER IS BAD?

The first step in avoiding bad weather is by researching beforehand what the average seasonal temperatures, rainfall, cloud cover, and wind are for your chosen area.

If you’re intentionally wanting to go in more of a “shoulder season” or “off season” to avoid the crowds, make sure to research seasonal road and transportation closures that may impact your day. Also check for recurring natural phenomenon like wildfires, floods, landslides, monsoons, typhoons, tornadoes, etc.

There is always a risk or chance of bad weather with an outdoor elopement, so make sure to consider backup locations in the surrounding area and leave flexibility in your schedule and be ready to go with the flow. At the end of the day, getting to marry your love matters most.



DIGGING INTO ACTIVITIES, CELEBRATION & FUN!

FOOD & DRINKS

Is there a certain meal or type of cuisine that you just have to have on your wedding day? Is there a restaurant you can go to, or should you hire a private chef? If you're hiking, can you take a picnic with you?

ACTIVITIES - FUN THINGS TO DO!

What fun things do you want to be a part of your elopement day? Do you want to soak in a hot spring, go stargazing, ski, stand up paddleboard, or kayak?

CHAMPAGNE, CONFETTI & SPARKLERS

Celebrating is important, but make sure to leave no trace with your activities. Find and pick up that champagne cork, find an eco-friendly confetti option (like local leaves or native wild flower petals)—and look into fire codes and fire bans before planning to light sparklers.

MUSIC

If you want music (live or recorded) to be a part of your day, make sure you plan how you will play it (or have someone play it for you). Also make sure to check if you're allowed to play amplified music at your location.

ADVENTURE
INSTEAD



ALRIGHT! HAVE YOU MADE SOME PROGRESS TO FIND OUT WHAT'S POSSIBLE FOR YOUR ELOPEMENT DAY?

**SWEET! YOU'RE WELL ON YOUR WAY TO GETTING MARRIED IN THE
MOST INCREDIBLE, INTIMATE, AND MEANINGFUL WAY POSSIBLE!**

If you've had trouble with this stage or feel like you've gotten stuck—don't be afraid to ask for help. It's worth getting the right support to make your dream elopement day possible—it only comes around once, and you deserve to say your vows in the incredible way that you imagine.

As elopement photographers & guides—Stage 2 is where we tend to help couples the MOST with their elopement planning process. We absolutley love helping make your vision come to life.

STAGE 3

MAKE CHOICES
& START BOOKING

MAKE CHOICES & START BOOKING

Alright!

Now that you've decided what is important to you and you've dug deep into research, it's time to make some choices and start booking things!

The goal of this stage isn't to finalize every single detail—but to get the most important things into place so you can fill in the details from there (Stage 4).

WHAT TO DECIDE FIRST

PICK YOUR DATE

Is there a meaningful date for the two of you? Does your date work with your dream lodging or location and your favorite photographer's schedule? Does your date work for anyone joining you?

Don't forget to check for holidays and special events that may also affect your chosen elopement location.

PICK YOUR SPOT

Decide on the general area that you want to have your ceremony.

For example: "We want to say our vows on the edge of this canyon, on top of that mountain, or in this sand dune field."

The exact spot where you stand to say your vows can still be spontaneous and decided on your day—just be sure about the general area so you can confidently book lodging and transportation.

PRO TIP

For most public natural spaces, eloping on a weekday will mean more seclusion than a weekend.



WHAT TO BOOK FIRST

BOOK NEARBY LODGING

Check VRBO, Airbnb, Hotels.com, booking.com, google maps, and google to find unique lodging for your elopement. Check Google Maps to find out how long the drive time will be between your lodging and chosen ceremony location. The closer your lodging can be to your ceremony site, the more streamlined your day will be—but for some remote locations, it's not uncommon for the closest room to be 1-2 hours away.

Consider the ammount of space that you'll need at your lodging: Is it going to be just the two of you? Or are other people coming? If you need multiple lodging spaces, do you want them to be close together? Are you going to do a "first look"? If so, do you need lodging with two rooms so that you two can get ready seperately?

BOOK TRANSPORATION

Once you have booked your lodging and decided on your ceremony location, find out the best way to travel between them. If you have other people coming, do you need multiple rental cars or would a shuttle make more sense? Do you need to reserve ferry crossing tickets or book a helicopter tour? Will any of your locations potentially require a 4WD vehicle? Are you comfortable with 4WD roads? If not, look into hiring a professional 4WD company.



ONE MORE THING

SHOULD YOU TELL YOUR FAMILY?

If they are not going to be physically present on your elopement day, you can choose to tell your family beforehand or to keep it a surprise.

A fun way to tell your friends & family is to throw a dinner party to announce it. You can show your family & friends photos of your rad elopement location and where you'll be staying and get them excited about your plans.

If you want to have your family & friends still feel involved, even though you're eloping, you can ask them to help with the planning process in other ways. Friends & family can help you with dress/suit shopping. They can also throw an engagement party or a reception for you and your partner. They can write letters of love & support for you and your partner to read on your elopement day. Or they can join you on your travels, and celebrate with you before & after your elopement.

A great compromise a lot of couples do is to throw a fun dinner party or casual reception after they elope.

REMEMBER THIS IS YOUR DAY AND ALL OF THESE DECISIONS ARE ENTIRELY UP TO YOU AND YOUR PARTNER.

PRO TIP

You can send out fun elopement announcement cards that say:

"We're going to say 'I Do' then we'll party with you!"

OKAY! ARE THE MAIN CORNERSTONES OF YOUR ELOPEMENT DAY SET INTO PLACE?

**AWESOME! THE HARDEST PART OF THE PLANNING PROCESS IS
DONE! THE REST IS JUST DETAILS.**

Once you've nailed down your date, location, and booked lodging, the hardest and most pressing parts of your planning process are complete. Take a break to celebrate, tell your family & friends (if you want to), and start getting excited that you're one step closer to your dream elopement day!

STAGE 4

FINALIZE DETAILS
& GET READY

FINALIZE DETAILS & GET READY

Yay! You are in the final stages of your elopement planning process and it's getting exciting!

Stage 4 is all about filling in the details now that you have the main parts of your plan set into place.

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO KEEP THINGS ORGANIZED?

There's a lot of things to keep track of in this stage—so we've formatted it like a checklist! We suggest breaking up the many decisions into bite-size pieces. You can set due dates in your calendar, or keep a running to-do list.

PLANNING CHECKLIST ATTIRE & ACCESSORIES

○ DRESS/SUIT

Bridal shops can be strict with their timelines and most suggest shopping 6-12 months in advance with 3 fittings before your day.

But don't worry! There are so many great places to buy dresses online or in local stores. Try searching for a "white maxi dress" if you want a gorgeous dress without a wedding pricetag.

○ SHOES

Make sure to wear comfortable shoes with good support and good tread on the soles—if you're adventuring outside all day this is crucial!

○ LAYERS

If your'e eloping somewhere that might be cold or windy, make sure to have fun warm layers that you'd be happy being photographed in.

○ JEWELRY & ACCESSORIES

PLANNING CHECKLIST

VENDORS & DETAILS

☐ PHOTOGRAPHER

If you haven't already booked your dream photographer, make sure to find someone you personally connect with & is experienced with elopements.

☐ HAIR & MAKEUP

Are you doing your hair & makeup yourself or professionally? How will you touch it up?

☐ FLOWERS

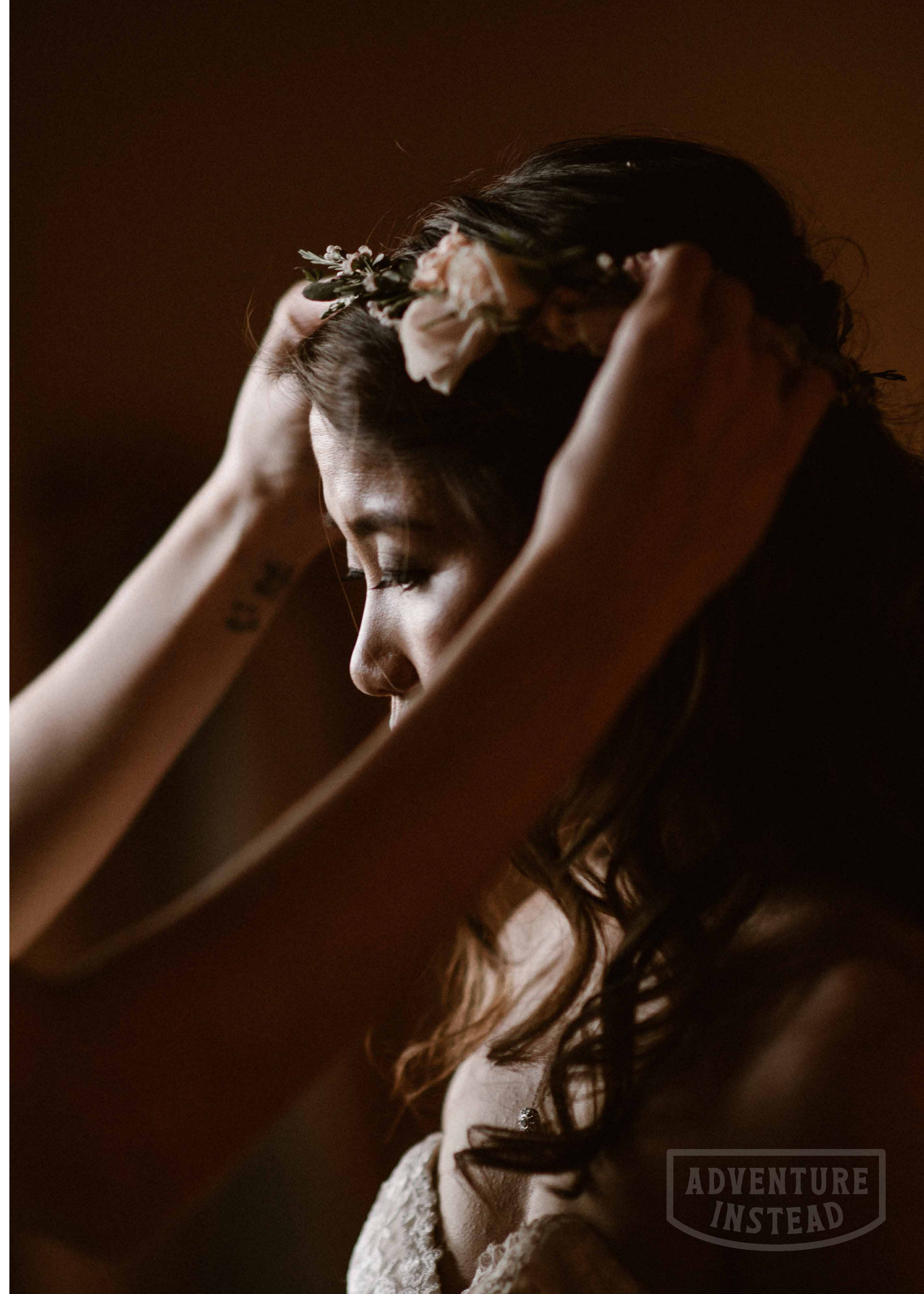
Is a bouquet important to you? Can you get one close to your location or do you need to pick one up in a bigger city before you go?

☐ OFFICIANT

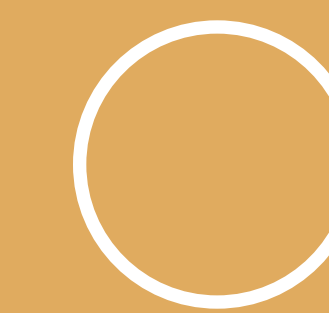
Do you need/want an officiant or do you plan to "self-solemnize"?

☐ MUSIC/MUSICIANS

☐ PRIVATE CHEF/CATERING



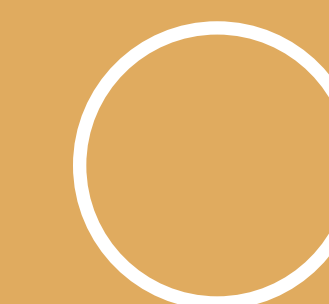
PLANNING CHECKLIST ACTIVITIES & FUN



HIKING

If you're planning to hike to your location, you'll need to bring some extra items. Find a quality hiking backpack with good weight distribution and comfortable hip belts that will fit everything you plan to bring. If your hike is at sunrise, consider packing your attire in your bag, and changing when you get to your location.

Bring extra layers for the hike up, and for when you're in your wedding attire. It's always a good idea to have a trail map, hand warmers, headlamps, sunscreen, bugspray, rain gear, and plenty of food and water.



OTHER FUN THINGS TO DO

Your elopement day can look however you'd like. We have seen couples go skiing, kayaking, stand up paddleboarding, sky diving, horseback riding, white water rafting, zip-lining, stargazing, go on a hot air balloon ride, and even go scuba diving.

Arrange your activities and gather any special gear or additional vendor support you need—like maybe a helicopter pilot, sailboat captain, or sherpa?

PLANNING CHECKLIST

CEREMONY & TIMELINE

○ FINALIZE YOUR CEREMONY

Write your vows, gather any objects that are important to you, and purchase your wedding bands. Plan your ceremony structure, including any readings, and/or cultural or religious elements.

Also consider planning a surprise for your partner. Either something special during the ceremony like reading letters from family members, playing a special song, or a surprise gift.

○ SKETCH OUT YOUR TIMELINE

Make sure you give yourself plenty of time for a relaxed day with no rushing or stressing. Leave room to be spontaneous—some of the best elopement experiences are unplanned.

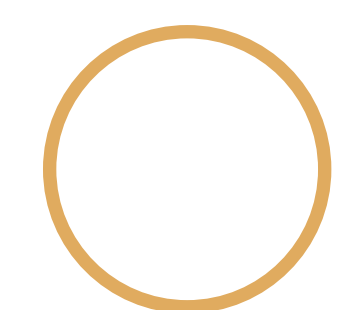
Work with your photographer to decide what time of day will be best for your photos.

Don't forget to leave plenty of time to eat, drink, and celebrate!



PLANNING CHECKLIST

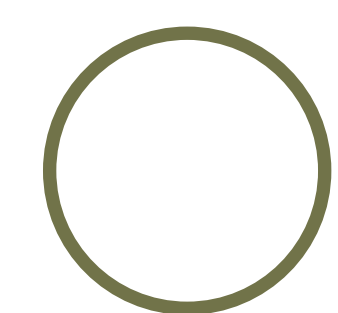
1 WEEK BEFORE CHECKLIST



GET PACKED

Pack in advance. Make sure you have your rings, vows, and any momentos, and prepare any gifts, letters, or surprises you have for each other.

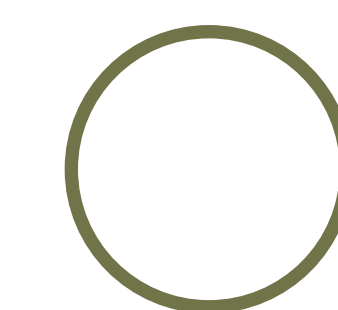
Make sure you are prepared with all clothing accessories, jewelry, shoes, and layers you need.



CHECK WEATHER

Check the weather the week before you leave for your trip and make any necessary adjustments. Review your backup plan options for locations just in case.

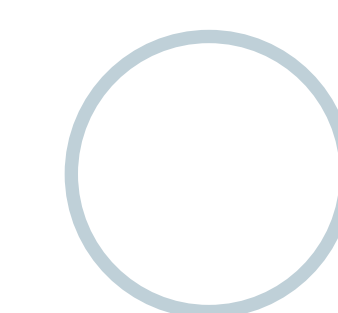
It's a great idea to also double check your destination for any recent changes to closures. Give the local ranger another call for peace of mind.



FINALIZE YOUR TIMELINE

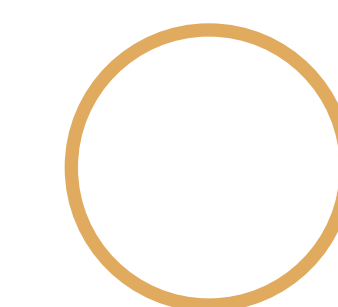
Review and finalize your elopement day timeline with your vendors.

Make sure you finalize all payments to your vendors and consider how you will tip them.



PICK UP YOUR MARRIAGE LICENSE

Pick up your marriage license and any other legal documents, if required.



WHEN YOU ARRIVE

Take care of your body. Help your body acclimate so that you can have the most enjoyable elopement day.

PLANNING CHECKLIST DAY BEFORE CHECKLIST

○ THE DAY BEFORE

Relax, take it easy, and make sure you go to bed early. You have an important day ahead of you!

- Relax
- Eat well
- Drink lots of water
- Get good sleep

**YAY! YOUR ELOPEMENT
DAY IS NEARLY HERE!**

STAGE 5

HAVE THE BEST
ELOPEMENT DAY!

HAVE THE BEST ELOPEMENT DAY!

Whoo! You made it! All of your hard work brainstorming, researching, and planning is done. All that's left is to enjoy the heck out of your elopement day.

We hope it is absolutley EVERYTHING you've been dreaming of.

HOW TO HAVE THE BEST ELOPEMENT DAY

BE PRESENT WITH YOUR PARTNER AND LET YOUR EMOTIONS FLY

Make sure you soak in every moment and enjoy the time spent together.

Enjoy your relaxed timeline and don't worry about how you look.

Don't stress—if you have a great experience together, great photos will follow.

ADVENTURE
INSTEAD



A couple in wedding attire are walking on a rocky mountain trail. The man is wearing a dark suit and tie, and the woman is wearing a white wedding dress. They are both smiling and looking at each other. In the background, there is a large, rugged mountain peak covered in snow under a clear sky.

ADVENTURE
INSTEAD

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU RETURN

TELL YOUR FRIENDS & FAMILY!

Tell your friends and family!

Ask your photographer for a sneak peak of images that you can share with your friends and family.

HAVE A PARTY TO CELEBRATE!

You're married! Now go celebrate! Have a party, barbeque, dinner, or reception surrounded by your loved ones.

RELIVE THE EXPERIENCE OVER & OVER AGAIN

Consider ordering an album from your photographer so you can view the whole story of your day and relive the memories. Display your printed photos around your home to remind you of your perfect day.

THERE IS NOTHING BETTER THAN THE FEELING

OF DITCHING THE BIG WEDDING STRESS AND MAKING THE BRAVE CHOICE
TO HAVE A WEDDING DAY THAT TRULY HONORS & REFLECTS
YOUR AMAZING RELATIONSHIP.

WE HOPE THIS GUIDE SHEDS LIGHT ON PLANNING YOUR ELOPEMENT
AND BRINGS YOU ONE STEP CLOSER TO YOUR DREAM DAY.



If you need any help along the way, we (Maddie Mae, Amber, Tori, and Bessie) would love to help.

ADVENTURE INSTEAD - ELOPEMENT PHOTOGRAPHERS & GUIDES

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