CALIFORNIA WEDDING ASSOCIATION

The Ultimate California Wedding Planning Checklist

A calm, chronological plan from the first conversation through the final thank-you note.

A complimentary planning resource for California couples

How to use this checklist
Write in your wedding date, work backward through the timeline, and check off only the steps that apply to your celebration. California weddings may require extra planning for heat, wildfire smoke, coastal weather, traffic, permits, and outdoor-noise rules.

Wedding snapshot

- [ ] Wedding date or preferred season: _____
- [ ] City / county: _____
- [ ] Estimated guest count: _____ Target budget: $_____
- [ ] Top three priorities: _____

18+ months before

- [ ] Talk openly about the kind of celebration you both want: size, feeling, location, culture, faith, and priorities.
- [ ] Set a preliminary total budget and decide who may contribute.
- [ ] Draft a guest-count range before touring venues.
- [ ] Choose a California region and two or three possible seasons.
- [ ] Create a shared wedding email address and cloud folder.
- [ ] Research venue price ranges, weather patterns, travel access, and local curfews.
- [ ] Decide whether you want a planner, partial planner, or month-of coordinator.

12-18 months before

- [ ] Tour venues and compare the full cost, not only the rental fee.
- [ ] Ask outdoor venues about rain, heat, wind, wildfire smoke, and power-outage backup plans.
- [ ] Confirm parking, accessibility, restroom capacity, sound restrictions, and end times.
- [ ] Select the date and sign the venue contract.
- [ ] Purchase wedding insurance if appropriate; confirm venue insurance requirements.
- [ ] Hire the wedding planner or coordinator.
- [ ] Book priority vendors: photographer, videographer, caterer, and entertainment.
- [ ] Create the first working budget and payment schedule.
- [ ] Reserve hotel blocks if many guests will travel.
- [ ] Launch a simple wedding website with location and travel information.

9-12 months before

- [ ] Choose the wedding party and discuss expected expenses and responsibilities.
- [ ] Book the officiant and discuss ceremony style, traditions, and personalization.
- [ ] Hire florist, rentals, lighting, bakery, photo booth, and transportation as needed.
- [ ] Begin attire shopping and allow extra time for special orders or alterations.
- [ ] Schedule engagement photos.
- [ ] Create a design direction: colors, texture, stationery, florals, and lighting.
- [ ] Build the guest list with complete mailing and email addresses.
- [ ] Send save-the-dates, especially for destination or holiday-weekend weddings.
- [ ] Review passport and travel-document expiration dates for international plans.

6-9 months before

- [ ] Order invitations and day-of stationery.
- [ ] Finalize food and beverage direction; schedule tastings.
- [ ] Book hair and makeup; schedule trials.
- [ ] Select ceremony music, cocktail-hour music, and reception entertainment.
- [ ] Reserve rehearsal-dinner or welcome-party space.
- [ ] Choose wedding bands and allow time for sizing or engraving.
- [ ] Plan transportation for the couple, wedding party, and guests if needed.
- [ ] Confirm whether beach, park, drone, amplified-sound, or photography permits are required.
- [ ] Review contracts and update the payment tracker.

4-6 months before

- [ ] Finalize the invitation list and mail invitations based on travel needs.
- [ ] Choose readings, cultural rituals, unity traditions, and ceremony participants.
- [ ] Draft the ceremony outline with the officiant.
- [ ] Create the first wedding-day timeline with the planner and venue.
- [ ] Plan family and wedding-party photograph groupings.
- [ ] Select menu, desserts, bar plan, and late-night food.
- [ ] Choose rentals, linens, tabletop items, signs, and floor plan.
- [ ] Arrange childcare, pet care, or accessibility accommodations if needed.
- [ ] Begin dance lessons if desired.

2-4 months before

- [ ] Track RSVPs and follow up with missing responses.
- [ ] Attend attire fittings and confirm accessories, shoes, and undergarments.
- [ ] Finalize floral quantities and personal flowers.
- [ ] Confirm ceremony and reception layouts.
- [ ] Create a rain, heat, wind, smoke, and cold-weather decision plan with a deadline for activating it.
- [ ] Order favors or welcome-bag items, if using them.
- [ ] Draft toasts and personal vows.
- [ ] Prepare vendor meals and dietary requirements.
- [ ] Create a list of tips or gratuities and decide who will distribute them.
- [ ] Research the marriage-license process for the county issuing your license.

1-2 months before

- [ ] Apply for the California marriage license at the appropriate time; licenses are generally valid for 90 days.
- [ ] Confirm who will return the completed license after the ceremony.
- [ ] Finalize guest count, seating assignments, and meal selections.
- [ ] Prepare place cards, escort cards, menus, signs, and table numbers.
- [ ] Finalize the ceremony script and pronunciation of every name.
- [ ] Complete the detailed timeline and distribute the approved version.
- [ ] Confirm vendor arrival times, load-in instructions, parking, and contact person.
- [ ] Create a master contact sheet with every vendor and important family member.
- [ ] Have final hair and makeup trial; photograph the approved look.
- [ ] Break in wedding shoes safely indoors.

Two weeks before

- [ ] Give the venue and caterer the final guaranteed guest count.
- [ ] Reconfirm every vendor's balance, due date, arrival time, and deliverables.
- [ ] Review final weather patterns without making premature decisions.
- [ ] Pack ceremony items, decor, signs, favors, and personal accessories by location.
- [ ] Prepare final payments and labeled gratuity envelopes.
- [ ] Confirm who is transporting gifts, cards, personal items, florals, and leftover food.
- [ ] Practice vows and ceremony movement with the officiant or coordinator.
- [ ] Share emergency contacts and the backup plan with key people.

Wedding week

- [ ] Pick up attire and inspect every piece before leaving the shop.
- [ ] Steam or press attire and store it safely.
- [ ] Pack an overnight bag, emergency kit, medication, rings, vows, license, and identification.
- [ ] Hold the rehearsal and explain the processional, recessional, and ceremony cues.
- [ ] Give the license and rings to the responsible people.
- [ ] Hydrate, eat normally, and protect sleep as much as possible.
- [ ] Set phones to allow calls from the coordinator and essential vendors.
- [ ] Stop making unnecessary changes after the final timeline is approved.

Wedding day

- [ ] Eat breakfast and drink water before hair and makeup begin.
- [ ] Give phones, payments, questions, and vendor decisions to the designated point person.
- [ ] Confirm both rings and the marriage license are at the ceremony location.
- [ ] Allow breathing room in the schedule rather than rushing every transition.
- [ ] Take a private minute together after the ceremony.
- [ ] Ask the officiant and witnesses to complete the license carefully and legibly.
- [ ] Enjoy the celebration - your planning has done its job.

After the wedding

- [ ] Confirm the completed marriage license was returned by the responsible person.
- [ ] Return rentals and borrowed items on time.
- [ ] Preserve attire, bouquet, vows, or keepsakes if desired.
- [ ] Request certified marriage-certificate copies when the record is available.
- [ ] Begin optional name-change steps only after obtaining the required documentation.
- [ ] Send thank-you notes and vendor reviews.
- [ ] Back up photographs and video in more than one location after delivery.
- [ ] Close the budget and save contracts, receipts, and final files.

Final planning notes

Things we do not want to forget