

Alternatives to engagement rings

Engagement rings are often sizable investments. Money magazine reports the average engagement ring costs around \$5,800. An engagement ring symbolizes the start of a lifelong commitment and may even set the tone for a couple's wedding day.

Jewelry styles are personal, and grooms-to-be should carefully research their significant others' preferences in terms of precious metals, colors and gemstones. Even though tradition holds that a diamond gemstone is classic for engagement rings, these precious stones are not the only options. In fact, before World War II, just 10 percent of proposals involved diamond engagement rings. That number jumped to 80 percent by 1990. However, many modern couples now lean toward other offerings not only for the uniqueness they provide, but also for the potential cost savings.

Those seeking something unique can embrace these engagement ring options.

- **Amethyst:** This vibrant, lavender-hued stone can be breathtaking when cut the

correct way. Purple shades have long been associated with royalty, making an amethyst fitting for such an occasion as special as an engagement. Because amethysts, which are less expensive than diamonds, are a seven on the Mohs scale for gemstone hardness, they can be very durable.

- **Knot rings:** These rings do not have a center stone. Rather, they're designed to be a tied knot or infinity symbol. These rings can be particularly sentimental as they represent true, unbroken love.

- **Opal:** Gemstones, like flowers, have been assigned certain meanings. Tying the engagement ring to one of them can infuse more symbolism into the relationship. Opal, for example, represents love, passion, creativity, spontaneity, and inspiration. Those traits seem tailor-made for surprise proposals.

- **Sapphire:** While sapphire stones often are blue, they can also be yellow, green, pink, and white. Sapphires are the third hardest mineral. A white sapphire can be the perfect diamond replacement.

- **Garnet or ruby:** Red is the definitive color of love. A Valentine's Day proposal can be made even more special by presenting an engagement ring with a red gemstone.

- **Moissanite:** The jewelry source Brilliant Earth says moissanite is a gemstone first discovered in 1893 by Henri Moissan in a meteorite that fell to earth. It is remarkably similar to a diamond in appearance and strength. Moissanite also has heightened brilliance, with a refractive index higher than that of a diamond.



Couples have many beautiful alternatives to diamonds that they can explore when shopping for engagement rings.

Hidden expenses that can sink your wedding budget



Couples should remember to build hidden expenses into their budgets when planning their weddings.

In the days of yore, the responsibility of paying for a wedding fell to the bride's parents. But that tradition has largely fallen by the wayside in recent years, when more and more couples have used their own savings to finance their weddings. Few couples enter the process of planning their weddings unaware of just how expensive weddings can get, but costs can easily begin to escalate if couples are not careful.

Couples know that certain wedding expenses, such as the cost of booking a reception hall, will eat up a large portion of their budgets. But there are some hidden expenses that couples must build into their budgets to avoid finding themselves in debt as they walk down the aisle as husband and wife.

- **Taxes:** Sales tax might not seem so significant when you're buying everyday items, but the taxes add up quickly when paying for a wedding. Depending on where you live, state and local sales tax can exceed 9 percent in the United States, and some Canadians pay as much as 15 percent in combined sales taxes depending on where they live. Before signing contracts with any vendors, couples

should get the price including sales tax written into their contracts, as failing to do so may result in a several thousand dollar surprise when the time to pay up arrives.

- **Gratuities:** Gratuities are another potentially hefty expense that often takes engaged couples by surprise as they start to plan their weddings. Some reception halls build gratuities for staff into their estimates, and these tips for the staff can be as high as 25 percent at some venues. But even if gratuities for reception hall staff are already accounted for, don't forget to include tips for additional vendors the day of the wedding. Couples may be expected to tip the florist, photographer, band or deejay and even the reception hall maitre d' if his or her gratuity is not included in the aforementioned staff tip. Brides-to-be typically tip their hairstylist and makeup artist on the day of the wedding as well.

- **Postage:** Couples who plan to invite guests via email or online invitations can skirt the cost of postage. But many couples still prefer traditional paper invitations, which include return envelopes that tradition suggests should also be stamped. Save-the-date

cards have grown in popularity as well, and these cards must also be stamped and mailed. Depending on the size of your guest list, postage can cost several hundred dollars before you mail your last invitation. And don't forget to save some money for postage to mail thank-you cards once the big day has come and gone.

- **Overtime:** Overtime fees for reception hall staff and additional outside vendors are typically written into contracts, but few couples imagine needing more than the predetermined allotment of time noted in their contracts. But it's better to be safe than sorry, as unanticipated events such as a misplaced wedding license or heavy traffic on the way to the venue can force the party to start late and thus extend past its deadline. Set aside some money for overtime so you don't find yourselves scrounging for dollars or charging the extra few hundred dollars on your credit cards.

Weddings are expensive, and even more so when hidden fees start to make their presence felt. Couples who build such fees into their budgets will find it easier to avoid breaking the bank than those who don't.