

In 2015, Bridebox.com named Dean Sanderson one of the top 20 wedding photographers in the Riviera Maya. The Riviera Maya is a gorgeous stretch of coastline on the northeastern side of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula in the state of Quintana Roo. With Cancun in its northern reaches, Tulum in the south, Playa del Carmen in the center, and Cozumel off the coast, the Riviera Maya is a tourism and resort hotspot. Its idyllic environment has also made it one of the world's most popular locations for destination weddings.

Dean and I talked about his professional start as he prepared to shoot a wedding that afternoon. Dean began life as a professional photographer 11 years ago, working in the commercial and advertising industry. He began photographing weddings on the weekends, and as time went on, he found his professional time split between commercial projects and weddings. While he enjoyed the challenges of the advertising industry, he says he was on the search for a better life: "I needed to stop splitting my attention."

During a conversation with his business coach in the summer of 2011, Dean made the decision that would change his life. He was no stranger to destination weddings in Mexico – he had traveled and worked as the official photographer for a handful of destination weddings before, and really enjoyed it. He explained further, saying: "Here's the thing, I liked wedding photography, but what I really liked was the wedding lifestyle in Mexico." The stress and carousing associated with the advertising and commercial lifestyle no longer interested him, and he decided he would have a better life working as a wedding photographer in Mexico instead of shooting commercial work in Canada. Now, five years after the change, he declares that it was an "incredibly intelligent decision."

When asked about what he enjoys about life in Mexico (is it the lifestyle? More free time?), Dean laughs and says, "I enjoy working, and I enjoy working really hard. I can do that here and be rewarded." Dean doesn't mind working long hours, as some weddings require, but the payoff is better in Mexico than in Canada.

Dean's wedding packages cost anywhere between \$2000-\$4000, and he says he does well enough to live comfortably and not worry about a monthly budget. This work has allowed him to purchase a home in Quintana Roo, close to the coastal resort town of Playa del Carmen. Playa del Carmen is one of the newer resort areas—only about 15 years old—and Dean observes that after moving there in 2011, the community, "exploded."

Average property prices in Quintana Roo range from \$20,000 to \$500,000 USD, depending on how near or far away you want to live to hotspots such as Playa Del Carmen, Cancun, and Tulum. Dean warns those who are looking to buy a home in Mexico to be aware "the biggest problem they have here is that the mortgages are very expensive. 7-15% is normal in today's low interest market, and credit isn't really available. People either bring cash with them or they rent—and there are a lot of good rentals in town. You can live off \$35,000-40,000 a year here easily."

The Riviera Maya is a top destination wedding location, second only to Paris. The industry thrives in a mutually beneficial relationship with the plethora of high-end, all-inclusive resorts, bright, historical haciendas, and picturesque beaches. So while the booming destination wedding industry indicates there is plenty of work, it also means there is plenty of competition. There are many wedding photographers in the area, so standing out is important. Dean offers something unique with his ethereal "trash the dress" photo sessions. He utilizes underwater photography to capture otherworldly scenes of the bride and groom in *cenotes*—subterranean aquifer systems which the Mayans used as source of fresh water as well as a place to perform ritual offerings.

“You have to remain competitive,” Dean insists. “You need to stand out and marketing is important. We try to keep our Instagram and Facebook going, but really, it’s like any business—it is multi-pronged. When you are trying to decide between two different photographers, restaurants, or resorts, you will look at all the normal channels to find out as much as you can about the service – yelp, their website, social media. You must have a presence.” He also mentions that as much as there are “perks” to working in Mexico, such as little to no regulation, these perks can also make moving forward with visas and licensing more difficult. He hired an immigration lawyer to help navigate the legal end of moving and working as an expat in Mexico.

Now, at the age of 43, Dean has been working as a destination wedding photographer for five years and says he is “very, very happy” with his decision. “In Canada, I found that you can love your work and like your life, and I moved to Mexico in order to love my life and like my work. But now, I love my life and I love my work. My clients are amazing and I get to join them on one of the happiest days of their lives.”

For those thinking of making the move to the Riviera Maya, Dean says he’s noticed a pattern with other expats coming to the area, “Once you decide to go for it, you’ll know within 3-6 months whether it is right for you. People are either here for a very long time or they go back home quickly.”