

Variety makes Island wedding festival a hit

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ANNA MARIA ISLAND — There are two basic ways to do the annual Anna Maria Island Wedding Festival, which drew a crowd estimated at 800 on Sunday.

The traditional way favored by most couples is to be close throughout, like Sasha Howard and Mike Dent, of Nokomis, who hugged, held hands, smiled, gasped in amazement, nodded approvingly or disapprovingly and whispered to each other as they visited many of the 100 wedding vendors in 14 different locations on the island.

Like most other couples, Sasha and Mike, who are due to be married in May 2011, were awed by what's now available for those planning their weddings, including having the wedding webcast so people thousands of miles away can watch on their computers, which is offered by Mixons in the Grove, said Mixon Farms' Kathy Decker.

"We're pre-planning," said Mike, a technician for Comcast Cable in Sarasota.

Sasha makes paper mache sculptures and learned about the festival from The Knot online newsletter.

Then there's the other way to do the festival — the James Alexis way.

James is to be married to Sanford's Irene Cruz.

While Irene was going from location to location Sunday with her girlfriends, obsessing over every detail of their May 7, 2011, wedding on the beach at The Sandbar Restaurant, James was sitting with his best man, Bert Vernet and future father-in-law, Jose Diaz, enjoying a malty beverage.

The trio was watching a movie, "The Hangover," in a little room in the Anna Maria Island Community Center.

"It's his fault," James said of his future father-in-law. "Jose told Irene he had to take me somewhere."

Jose blamed Bert.

"He got a postcard in the mail," Jose said, pointing at Bert and shaking his head.

James' only defense is that the Groom's Zone is officially just as much a part of the festival as Jack Elka Photography, Something Blue Bridal Boutique, Weddings of Sarasota or Nuovo Bride Magazine, said Caryn Hodge, event chairwoman for the festival.

The party room was set up this year for guys who feel squeamish trying to take in all the decisions and need a breather with other guys.

"We also wanted to let the guys know that we have a lot here for them when they plan their weddings, like fishing charters, the Tampa Bay Bucs and Rays, polo and on and on," Hodge said.

OK, maybe James will be able to wiggle off the hook since he was technically at the festival the whole time.

Jack Elka coined the marketing phrase, "Anna Maria Island: The Beach Wedding Capital of Florida," which seems to have taken hold, Hodge said.

The festival has soared from 350 attendees the first year to 550 last year. Roughly one third of those who attend are couples about to get married, Hodge said.

Sunday's crowd came from Orlando, Tampa and even the east coast of Florida.

And what about economy? The marriage business is recession-proof, said Susan Cavanaugh, president and publisher of *Nuova Bride*, a glossy magazine filled with handsome advertisements.

Based on Sunday's crowd and the way they were browsing, it seemed she was right.

Standing in Elka's studio, Karen MacMillan and David Wuebbolt decided that their wedding photo album would have the old-fashioned look of photos in a book, not something more computer-graphic looking.

"This is how my mom and dad had their wedding album and that's how I remember seeing it as a child," Karen said.

Back where Mike and Sasha were on the prowl, Tammy Gamso, of *The Finishing Touch*, an on-location hair and make-up firm, seemed to put things in context.

"Every bride dreams of her special day and we have to cater to their budgets, but common sense is suspended for that one day," Gamso said.

One bride-to-be was so smitten with the white beach wedding dress being modeled at *Something Blue Bridal Boutique* that she bought it immediately and the model had to rush in and take it off, said Kristi Dole, of *Something Blue Bridal Boutique*.

"I'm now changing it to, 'Anna Maria Island: The Beach Wedding Capital of the World,'" Elka said Sunday.