Every couple planning their wedding is faced with the question of what to do with their out-of-town guests - the concern being that they may end up sitting bored in their hotel rooms with nothing to do and nowhere to go while you and your betrothed are in the final moments of your planning your big day. In truth, however, your out-of-town guests almost certainly will be glad to have some free time to explore the area and rest from their trip. Don't worry: they will understand that you are busy, and you don't have the obligation to entertain them, nor should they necessarily expect to be invited to the rehearsal dinner.

That's not to say, of course, that you can't include visiting guests at the rehearsal dinner if you wish (and budgets allow). But remember that rehearsal dinners are traditionally more intimate affairs, and are not in fact a practice wedding reception. They may include no one other than the bride and groom; their parents; grandparents, and siblings; the members of the wedding party; and the officiant. It is also polite to include their spouses, fiance(e)s, or live-in romantic partners, as well as any other rehearsal dinner guests. But boyfriends, girlfriends, and friends of single guests may be skipped if budgets just don't allow - though of course it's preferable to include them if you can.

For hosts who can't invite everyone, one approach is to suggest some local restaurants out-of-towners might want to try that evening - along with a message from you in their hotel room welcoming them and saying how much you look forward to seeing them the following day. This way, visiting guests have plenty of options for enjoying their evening, while the bride and groom are free to focus on the rehearsal dinner. If you have a wedding website, you can include links to maps, restaurants, and local attractions so guests can make plans in advance. It's a greener alternative to sending out mass mailings!

A Welcoming Touch

When my friends Ken and Jessica got married, I drove nine hours to be there. Arriving at my hotel room, I was grateful to discover a pretty paper bag filled with fruit, bottled water, mints,

granola bars, and a lovely note from the couple. This type of generous gesture is sure to make any out-of town guest feel welcome - the size and expense don't matter; it's the spirit of inclusiveness that counts.

Things to Include in a Welcome Packet

A welcome note from the couple ~ area maps ~ lists of restaurants ~ brochures on local attractions ~ snacks ~ bottled water ~ mini Champagne ~ chocolates ~ mints ~ scented votive candles (and matches) ~ packets of bubble bath or shower gel.

The Out-Of-Towners' Party

Another great alternative is to go the extra mile and arrange a separate party or dinner for visiting guests. Held on the same evening as the rehearsal dinner, it gives your friends a chance to get acquainted or catch up while you, your attendants, and your family are busy at the rehearsal dinner.

This party is often given by multiple hosts, often friends or family of the bride and groom, so they can share tasks and expenses, and it could be held at a private home, at a restaurant, or in a club. Invitations should have been sent well in advance so that guests can plan their travel accordingly. Often this party is considered the hosts' wedding gift to the bride and groom, so if you are lucky enough to have good friends throw this party for you, be sure to thank them both with a gift and a handwritten thank-you note!

Article originally appeared in Vermont Vows Fall/Winter 2009