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The big business of Indian weddings



SAM PANTHAKY/AFP/Getty Images

Indian-American families have a higher median income than the rest of the U.S., according to census data.

Produced by Austin Cross

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STORY

For Indian millennials living in the U.S., a wedding may be the biggest party of their lives. Combining ancient tradition and American extravagance, these events can last for weeks and run well over six figures. It’s a booming industry, and venues across the country are all vying for a piece of the action.

“When hotels hear ‘Indian weddings’ they think, ‘cha-ching!’” says Ani Sandhu, owner of Ace of Events in the District of Columbia.

He’s one of the area’s most successful Indian wedding planners. In order to plan a successful Indian wedding, he says you must first understand the cultural significance of the event.

“In the Indian community, there are two things on their mind: one is education and one is marriage,” Sandhu says. “It’s not just the bride and groom getting married, it’s two families coming together ... it’s a party that lasts a very, very long time.”

Understanding the context, however, is just the prerequisite. The real heavy lifting happens when bringing together hundreds and even thousands of different elements to make each wedding a unique experience for each couple.

Lavish South Asian weddings are growing in popularity, Sandhu says, and more venues are rolling out the red carpet to the wealthy client base. (Indian-American households have a higher median income than the rest of the U.S., according to census data.)

“On an average ... we’re usually over a quarter-million dollars when it’s all said and done,” Sandhu says. Three-hundred- to 400-person guest lists are just the start.

“By the time you are flying back and forth from India, you have jewelry that’s coming in, then you have all these events that are happening, all these traditions that need to take place, the total value that clients are spending towards weddings adds up to be a quarter million, three-hundred thousand plus,” he says.

Many hotels have started training their staffs in Indian traditions and customs in an effort to make families feel more welcome.

Sandhu often gets some pretty out-of-the-box requests. One groom asked to arrive on the back of an elephant. Another asked to arrive in helicopter. But when a groom came to him two years ago asking to make his entrance on a jet ski in the Maryland harbor, Sandhu had to do some brainstorming.

“And I’m like, ‘How do you expect to get off a jet ski, take off your wet suit, and be in your traditional Indian gown and not need it to be ironed or anything?’”

He managed to talk the groom out this idea and found a compromise: “For that specific client then we rented a private yacht that could accommodate about 30 guests, and the groom and his groomsmen made their entrance on the yacht.”

Featured in: Marketplace Weekend for Friday, June 19, 2015



About the author

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