



East Meets Best

Indian weddings are quite the affair — and quite the moneymaker, if you do them right.

BY KATIE HENDRICK

Picture it:

a handsome groom, dressed in a knee-length, gold and ivory brocade tunic and complementary crimson head wrap, riding down a brick-paved boulevard atop a white horse that's also dressed to the nines — including hooves embellished with iridescent polish. His bride, a breathtaking sight in her ruby sari encrusted with sequins and crystals, stands in a ballroom that's been transformed into a Hindu temple filled with tapestries, columns, gilded statues and flowers seemingly everywhere — hanging from guests' chairs, bedecking food trays, circling every family member's neck. Nothing and no one is left unadorned. Even a figure of the Hindu deity Ganesh wears a garland of roses and jasmine.

Sound like a scene out of an elaborate Bollywood film or a movie star's wedding, organized by one of Hollywood's favorite florists, Preston Bailey or Jeff Leatham?

Hardly.

The aforementioned weekend-long nuptials happened in Pennsylvania. Two doctors in their twenties got married — to the tune of \$350,000.

And that's just within the average price range for an Indian American wedding. These opulent affairs, which typically span three to four days and involve hundreds of guests from across the country and around the globe, generally fall in the six-figure category. From Pittsburgh to Pasadena, Tampa to Tacoma, these weddings give florists a big chance to break into a market that's grown nearly 70 percent since 2000 (see "A Booming Demographic"). Do just one event well, our sources say, and expect steady business with the Indian community for years.

My Big, Fat Indian Wedding

"It's not a marriage between two people, but between two families," wrote Shivani Vora in a 2012 article for The New York Times titled, "Hindu Wedding Planners Thrive in the United States." "Parents often shop for their daughters' trousseau [wedding outfit] from the time they are born, and spend a sizable chunk of their life savings on the celebration."

For Shelley Kurian, owner of Escada Weddings in Dallas, guest lists hit 300

on the low end and can top out at 900, often including family members traveling from India.

This giant gathering calls for multiple ceremonies over the span of four days, all of which involve food, music and elaborate décor — "think festive backgrounds, with ornate fabrics, vibrant colors, bold floral designs," Kunian said. Given these details and the high headcounts, Indian weddings can be very expensive affairs.

Clients of Erin Calvimontes, owner of Divine Celebrations in Pittsburgh, typically spend \$150,000 to \$350,000 on their nuptials, with about 20 percent of that dedicated to floral decor.

She credits the communal nature of Indian weddings and emphasis on family participation for their festival-like vibe.

"It's not all about the chick in the white dress," Calvimontes said.

In fact, two very popular traditions (which vary depending on the family's sect) are totally groom-centric: a sehra bandi, a turban ceremony in which the groom's family and friends shower him with loose petals, and a baraat, the groom's processional ride on a white horse (see "Four Days of Festivities" for a rundown of a typical Indian wedding). After the groom is feted, they celebrate the union of families during a ritual called an aarti, when the bride's mother welcomes the groom with a tray topped with sweets, a lantern and flowers. Then, in what is called a milni, men from the bride's family exchange mallas (garlands) with men from the groom's family, "father to father, uncle to uncle, brother to brother," Calvimontes said.

Note: Each of the above traditions incorporates flowers in some way. And that's a good thing for florists.

"Indian weddings are all about the senses," Calvimontes said. "There's a tremendous emphasis on sights, sounds and smells. Flowers are a big part of that."

After more than 10 years decorating Indian weddings, Southern California florist Jill Nomura knows just how big a part they play.

"When it comes to their florals, there's no skimping," said the co-owner of M's Flowers, with locations in Montebello, Commerce and La Habera.



"When it comes to [Indian clients'] florals, there's no skimping."

—Jill Nomura, co-owner, M's Flowers

SENSORY EXPERIENCE Whether as loose petals or thick garlands, floral accents appear in practically every festivity of a traditional Indian wedding, as shown in this wedding, designed by Pittsburgh-based wedding planner Erin Calvimontes and florist April Schweitz Mason.

The business does at least 20 Indian weddings a year — for \$10,000 to \$40,000 a piece. Each involves copious centerpieces (40 to 80), dozens of garlands and a floral covering for a 10-foot tall mandap, a makeshift structure consisting of four pillars, under which the bride's and groom's immediate families sit during the ceremony.

Floral décor extends even to the animal kingdom, said Nomura, who's made elephant garlands for some of her Indian clients. ("Use big florals without thorns," she said.)

Word Gets Around

M's Flowers has achieved that impressive volume of Indian weddings without a single advertisement. The most effective way to be branded the best florist in the Indian community is word of mouth, agree florists and event planners who've broken into the market. After Nomura's father, a co-owner of M's, did his first Indian wedding 15 years ago, the bride's parents gave his name to their friends, who hired him, then referred him, "and so on and so on," Nomura said. Now, M's enjoys steady business from the Indian community for weddings and other events (especially medical fundraisers), as well as daily orders throughout the year.

"All it took was one," said Frankie Peltiere, AIFD, about the power of positive referrals.

The owner of Festive Atmospheres, LLC did his first weekend of ceremonies nine years ago and, throughout the event, fielded requests from about a dozen parents of brides-to-be.

"That's pretty routine," he said, of the "dozen or more" Indian weddings he does a year now (with floral budgets ranging from \$9,000 to \$50,000). "It's a very tight-knit community. Once you get a reputation as a multicultural designer, they will seek you out."

The power of referrals is evident in the familiar roster of photographers, caterers and musicians he runs into. "It's the same vendors at every wedding," he said.

Get in the Vendor Machine

As with so much in life, access to the Indian community often comes down to who you know. And you should know vendors, especially wedding planners,

STEPHEN BARRY/IN-VISION STUDIO



GRAND ENTRANCE A baraat, the groom's processional on a white horse, typically kicks off the third day of events, as shown here from a wedding designed by Calvimontes and Schweitz Mason. His friends and family members shower him with flower petals as he makes his way to his bride.

who already know this market. (For a list of national wedding coordinators who specialize in Hindu ceremonies, see "Cultural Cheat Sheet.")

"It's all about networking," said April Schweitz Mason, owner of Mocha Rose Floral and Event Design in Pittsburgh. She credits Calvimontes for her introduction to the Indian community. Because these events are long, detailed and elaborate, most families hire a wedding coordinator, "so building a relationship with them is a good starting point," Schweitz Mason said.

Indian weddings may look extravagant, but Calvimontes said selecting a florist for Indian clients is often "about finding someone who can work on a budget." While her Indian clients often spend double what the average western bride might, "not everyone does," she said. "But a creative florist can make a little look a lot."

And even those who are throwing six-figure events are watching their money carefully.

"Remember, that budget has to cover a lot for four days' events," Calvimontes



Erin Calvimontes
Owner, Divine Celebrations
Pittsburgh

Average number of Indian/fusion weddings per year: 10+
Average size of wedding: 600
Average budget per wedding: \$120,000 to \$350,000



Shelley Kurian
Owner, Escada Weddings
Dallas

Average number of Indian/fusion weddings per year: 12-15
Average size of wedding: 600-900
Average budget per wedding: \$30,000 to \$100,000

said. "It's a huge investment and they want to know they are getting the most for their money."

Florists who can offer designs with a good vase life "that can be recycled from one ceremony to the next" (think: alstroemeria, carnations, chrysanthemums) are usually the ones who catch her eye. (For tips on making buds last, see "Fuel Flowers for Marathon Celebrations," p. 48.)

As a wedding planner, Kurian scouts for florists "who are willing to step outside the traditional American look and try something bold and new." While experience with the Indian community is a definite advantage, it is not essential, she said.

"I just want to see that a florist has some exposure to cultural looks, even if it's just in a magazine spread, and that they have the skills to create it," she said.

Though "it can't hurt" for florists to do a little research on the various ceremonies and traditions of Indian weddings, "basically, they're job is all about the aesthetics," Kurian said. "I'm there to take care of the religious aspects and ultimately run the show."

Kurian encourages florists to court their local wedding planners, either with a phone call or email.

"Most are eager to build relationships with new vendors," she said.

Back up your pitch with pictures of your work, especially those that highlight your flair for the fabulous and facility with outsized demands.

"That's the evidence of your style," she said. "It's the best way for me to judge if you're a fit."

It doesn't matter that your designs aren't from an actual Indian wedding, she said. They just need to look like they *could be*. What to put in a mock portfolio: bold, monochromatic designs (especially those including red blooms); tall, architectural centerpieces with exotic buds; embellishments. ("My Indian brides tend to like a lot of crystals on their flowers," Kurian said.)

Since most florists don't have a mandap or yards of ornate fabric hanging out in the back room, a strong relationship with a vendor specializing in Indian props is crucial, Peltiere said. Usually the starting point for any planning, the props vendor has not

"It's a very tight-knit community. Once you get a reputation as a multicultural designer, they will seek you out."

—Frankie Peltiere, AIFD, owner, Festive Atmospheres, LLC

GLAMOROUS GARB Brides wear very ornate saris and need flowers that will complement — not compete with — their attire. Think: bold, monochromatic designs, said Dallas-based wedding planner Shelley Kurian.





Frankie Peltiere,
AIFD
Owner, Festive
Atmospheres,
LLC,
St. Louis, Mo.

**Average number of
Indian/fusion wed-
dings per year:** 12+
**Average size of
wedding:** 400 to
900

**Average budget
per wedding:**
\$9,000 to \$50,000



April Schweitz
Mason
Owner, Mocha
Rose Floral
Designs
Pittsburgh

**Average number of
Indian/fusion wed-
dings per year:** 3
**Average size of
wedding:** 200 to
300

**Average budget
per wedding:**
\$5,000 to \$10,000+

only the furniture and accessories specific to the culture, but also the influence to pull you into the vendor lineup.

You could also try hobnobbing with the medical community. According to Forbes magazine, Indian Americans make up less than 1 percent of the U.S. population, but constitute 8 percent of our physicians and surgeons. Volunteer work with the local hospital granted M's Flowers entrée into the Montebello Indian community. Nomura's father's first wedding was the daughter of one of the board members.

Mark Yourself as Multicultural

Though Peltiere gets a steady stream of clients from referrals, he also actively

hunts for more, because Indian weddings "are so profitable," he said. He and other St. Louis wedding vendors formed a group called the International Wedding and Event Designers (IWED), which puts together wedding shows specifically for Pakistani and Indian brides.

The idea to give prospective Indian clients a preview of what he could do struck Peltiere a few years ago, when he did the flowers for a conference for Eastern doctors. The event drew 4,000 people.

"I looked around the room and thought, 'wow, there could be a lot of weddings here,' and no one's specifically targeting this population," he said.

The inaugural show, in the Renaissance St. Louis Grand Hotel in December, featured musicians, dancers, a prayer room covered from ceiling to floor with sheets, a fashion show flaunting the latest line from a high-end designer specializing in Indian and Pakistani attire, and a three-course dinner, for which IWED charged \$55 a person. (The fee covered food and performers. Recognizing that the event could generate business for the hotel, too, Peltiere leveraged an established professional connection to get the conference space free of charge.)

Nearly 400 guests paid to attend because it wasn't just a collection of vendor booths, "it was about creating an experience," Peltiere said. Not a single one of them, however, would be walking down the aisle anytime soon.

"It's mostly mothers who attended," he said, adding that parents do much of the planning. At the show's end, dozens of mothers approached him about doing their daughters' weddings, including several who said these weddings were at least two years away.

"The groom didn't even exist then," he said.

Get Acquainted

The consultation experience for an Indian wedding is not strikingly different than it would be for any other wedding, Schweitz Mason of Mocha Rose said.



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FOUR DAYS OF FESTIVITIES

Indian wedding traditions vary according to where the families are from or their sects, but most Hindu weddings last four days, following the schedule below.

HUMZA YASIN PHOTOGRAPHY



Day One: The Mehndi

This is when the bride and her closest female family members and friends gather together in traditional attire, and a professional henna designer or friends and relatives of the bride paint an intricate design on her hands and feet.

"The atmosphere is a festive one, with traditional Indian music, singing and dancing," Kurian said. "Tradition has it that the darker the henna designs are on the bride's hands, the more her husband and in-laws will love her."

Floral needs: loose petals, centerpieces

STEPHEN BARRY P/IN-VISION STUDIO



Day Two: The Sangeet

An English translation would be "singing together" or "singing with musical accompaniment," Kurian said, "which is a fitting description for this pre-wedding bash." Singing and traditional Indian dancing, including the garba and dandia, are the main aspects of this event.

Floral needs: centerpieces

Day Three: The Wedding

The wedding starts with the baraat, the groom's processional. Family and friends of the groom sing and dance to a dhol as he makes his entrance on a horse. After this, the bride's mother welcomes him into the family with an aarti, which involves a tray holding sweets, a lantern and loose petals. Then the bride and groom exchange garlands, as do the men in the bride's family with the men in the groom's.

The wedding ceremony, held under a mandap, a four-pillar altar adorned with Indian designs and fabrics (and often flowers), "can be quite long, but some choose to have an abbreviated version," Kurian said.

The most important tradition is the sapta-padi, the seven steps that the bride and groom take together around a fire, which is considered the sustainer of life in the Hindu religion, she said. As they circle the fire, they chant mantra, which are sacred vows the bride and groom make to one another.

Floral needs: loose petals (to throw at baraat, to decorate aarti tray, to line the aisle); garlands for bride and groom, family members, statues, mandap; bouquets, corsages, boutonnieres (for fusion weddings)

HUMZA YASIN PHOTOGRAPHY



Day Four: The Reception

The post-wedding after-party consists of lively Indian music and dancing, usually amid elaborate backdrops and columns. "The celebratory and festive culture of India is reflected in all aspects of the reception, including the brightly colored attire of the wedding guests, along with traditional Indian embellishments that are seen in design and décor," Kurian said.

Floral needs: tall, elaborate centerpieces; loose petals for trays of food



HUMZA YASIN PHOTOGRAPHY

A BOOMING DEMOGRAPHIC

According to the 2010 census, there are more than 2.8 million Asian Indians living in the U.S. (.9 percent of the total population), up from about 1.7 million (.6 percent) in 2000. That's an increase of 69 percent, making this demographic one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the U.S.

Where Are They?

New York City and Los Angeles have the highest concentrations of Indians (526,133 and 119,901, respectively), but it's not just the big metro areas along the coasts that attract this population. Midwestern cities, such as Chicago (171,901), Detroit (55,087), Minneapolis (29,453), St. Louis (16,874) and Cincinnati (14,696) have significant Indian communities — as do several in the South, including Dallas (100,386), Houston (91,637), Tampa, Fla. (23,526), Raleigh, N.C. (20,192) and Richmond, Va. (12,926).

Deep Pockets

With a median income of \$90,711 in 2010, Indians have the highest household income of all ethnic groups in the U.S., according to census data.

Of the nation's 691,000 physicians in the Department of Labor statistics, approximately 100,000 are of Indian origin, said Mark Stone, CEO of the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin. And that proportion is likely to grow: Today, one out of every four medical students is of Indian origin, Stone said.

Indians also lead in the engineering and technology fields. A 2007 study from the University of California, Berkeley, reported that one-third of engineers in Silicon Valley are of Indian descent and 7 percent of high-tech there firms are led by Indian CEOs.

You're going to find out what she's wearing, discuss colors choices and negotiate price, just as you would with all bridal clients. It's just that there may be decidedly more of those consultations, more details to hammer out (such as dimensions for ceremony pieces) and more family members with whom to confer (including, sometimes, not just parents, but siblings, as well, Kurian said).

For a typical Indian wedding or fusion wedding (half Indian, half western), Schweitz Mason meets with the wedding planner and the bride or her parents up to eight times compared to the one or two she does for western weddings. If that figure made you balk, fear not. Clients aren't fussier, she emphasizes, but the events are longer and therefore packed with more details to review.

Because very few Indian American bridal families shop around for a florist — they rely heavily on referrals within the community — Schweitz Mason and other florists say they do not charge for the initial consultation. After the third meeting, though, Schweitz Mason bills the client by the hour, with additional charges for travel, on site visits at venues and mock-up designs.

Meetings may also demand a bit more homework. Before the first one, Schweitz Mason researches the family's religion and some of the wedding traditions that go along with it. (For a crash course, see "Cultural Cheat Sheet.")

"It's not mandatory, because there's usually a wedding planner or a cultural director who lays everything out, but it helps them feel more comfortable if I have a little familiarity," she said. "You need them to



HUMZA YASIN PHOTOGRAPHY

CULTURAL BLEND Fusion weddings incorporate some Western traditions, such as bouquets for the bride and her attendants, Kurian said.

trust that you understand their culture, what they need and can deliver it."

The ability to interpret the bride or her family's vision for the wedding is key, Calvimontes said.

"Often, they know what they want, but they don't know how to express it," she said, noting that challenge is one brides from all backgrounds can face. "Florists with good communication skills, like April [Schweitz Mason], can figure out what the family wants the room to look like and help them pick the right flowers and styles to get it."

With so many things going on over so many days, the big picture of an Indian wedding trumps the micro details that have been known to throw some exacting brides into fits, Peltiere said.

"[Indian brides] are not nearly as picky about the types of flowers used as Western brides," he said. "It's great — none of them are insisting on peonies or garden roses."

Instead, they ask for floral designs with color and impact, which provides him a lot of creative flexibility and minimizes the stress and expenses involved with trying to source out-of-season blooms. But without specific requests, florists must be able to identify what the big picture should look like to suggest the flowers and designs that will achieve it.

For a starting point, ask not only what the bride is wearing but also what her family will be wearing.

"They spend a lot of time and money picking the perfect outfits — often traveling



Jill Nomura
Co-owner, M's Flowers
Commerce, La Habra and
Montebello, Calif.

Average number of Indian/fusion weddings per year: 20+

Average size of wedding: 400 to 600

Average budget per wedding: \$10,000 to \$40,000

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CULTURAL CHEAT SHEET

Although most Indian weddings involve a wedding coordinator who handles the religious aspects of the ceremonies, it never hurts to familiarize yourself with the culture's style and traditions to provide services that will wow your client.

STYLE STUDY GUIDE

- With the tagline, "for the bride who craves culture," Munaluchi Bride (munaluchibridal.com/blog) offers florists a sense of the styles favored by Indian brides, said Shelley Kurian, owner of Escada Weddings in Dallas.
- For real wedding inspiration, consult popular blogs, such as Style Me Pretty, with the search term "Indian wedding."
- Seeing traditional Indian attire can also provide a springboard for design ideas. For a catalogue, see sanaazdesign.com.

TRADITION TUTORIALS

- To learn about customs, Wikipedia actually provides a thorough breakdown. Search "Hindu wedding" or "South Asian wedding."
- To connect with a professional in the Indian wedding business, here are a few national planners who specialize in Indian weddings:
 - Spotlight Style*
spotlightstyle.com
 - Sonal J. Shah Event Consultants*
sjsevents.com
 - Tanari Events*
www.tanarievents.com
 - Planning Elegance*
www.planningelegance.com
 - Working Brides*
www.workingbrides.com/wp

STEPHEN BARRY/IN-VISION STUDIO



ADORNED Garlands play a major role in Indian weddings, decorating family members' necks, statuarities, tables and, often, the mandap. The grandest garlands, though, are worn by the bride and groom.

back to India to have them custom made — so everything must coordinate," Peltiere said. If you don't ask, you risk losing their business, he said, "because they will think you're disinterested."

Kurian recalls one florist she worked with who offered an attire-inspired finishing touch that thrilled a bride planning a fusion wedding.

"Instead of using satin or ribbon to decorate her bouquet, she asked the bride if she had any spare swatches of fabric from the ceremony she'd like wrapped around the handle," she said. "Little details like that can make a big difference."

Once you have prospective details mapped out, prepare for a little negotiating over the price.

"That's just one of their traditions," Schwietz-Mason said. "Bartering is expected because they're holding such a big, expensive event and the families want to feel confident they did everything they could to get the best price."

For his first few Indian weddings, Peltiere took the insistence on a lower price personally, "thinking that (the family) thought my work was worth less than it was." Now, he recognizes that it is just a cultural difference.

"Know, when you submit a proposal, that they will want you to take a percentage off," he said. "So don't low-ball yourself."

Peltiere itemizes everything from the florals to the labor, and during negotiations suggests scaling back the height of centerpieces, for example, or prioritizing decor that will be near the front of the room, where the most honored guests will be seated.

Train for the Marathon

If your last wedding had you tearing down centerpieces until 2 a.m., consider that a light workout compared to the marathon matrimony that is an Indian wedding event.

Indian weddings are "very profitable," Peltiere said, "but you will have to work for it."

The week of an Indian wedding, Nomura and eight to 10 employees put in "easily 100 hours," between processing flowers Monday and Tuesday, arranging garlands and centerpieces on Wednesday and setting up for each day of festivities, which can take 10 to 12 hours.

Nomura keeps a roster of part-timers who have experience with large events.

"The more hands you have available, the better," she said. "You will want help, but not anyone will do," she said.

Peltiere's tips: "caffeine and comfortable shoes." 🌸

Katie Hendrick is the senior editor of *Floral Management*. khendrick@safnow.org

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