

## You Should—And Now You Can—Attend An Indian Wedding



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Travel

*I cover singular, luxury travel and food experiences around the world*

Mumbai's [Taj Mahal Palace](#) is an iconic hotel—for its patrician domed architecture, its position opposite the landmark Gateway of India in the Arabian Sea, its historic Who's Who lineup of guests in the opulent Palace Wing. Fortunately, as a centerpiece of Indian culture, it also has a staff adept at wrapping Westerners in saris, a very useful feature when you attend a wedding in India and want to dress to fit in. One recent mother of the groom told me that she had 140 overseas guests wrapped by the able attendants at the Taj for her son's wedding. Fortunately I was the only one requesting their services on the day that I was attending a wedding since it took three attendants working together for an hour to wrap and pin mine (an extremely beautiful blush colored, intricately embroidered silk from the prominent designer [Ritu Kumar](#).) But as soon as I walked into the ceremony I was glad that I, and they, had made the effort to dress the part.

Also that I had been allowed to attend one in the first place. Indian weddings are one of the most compelling, illuminating rituals in Indian culture, a panoply of intimate, sacred ceremonies reflecting the joining of families not just the bride and groom mixed with lavish banquets, Bollywood style dance numbers and a veritable fashion show of vivid outfits and opulent jewels. Most weddings, the majority of which are Hindu, extend for three days but others can go on for longer—the one I attended went on for four on subsequent weekends in two different

The travel company [Cox & Kings](#) arranged my entry as they have in the past arranged other unusual activities in the country for me (the last: [spending a day with a food delivery dabbawalla in Mumbai](#), another unique aspect of Indian culture, and on this trip, arranging a delicious multi-course [Bohri lunch](#) at the home of a Mumbai family of this Yemeni sect, a visit to a private art collection and an early morning food tour in Jaipur). Due to the increased interest of visitors to the country in experiencing a wedding, various companies have begun to, for a price, add one to a travel itinerary. And with the size of many of these weddings—hundreds of guests are the norm-- it's easy to blend into the crowd even if you don't know the bride and groom.

This bride and groom, Freyan and Anup, were pretty modern but still adhered to certain traditions. The bride's elaborate sari the day of the wedding was the traditional red and the prelude to the ceremony involved flower petals tossed at the groom by the bride's family as he entered. The bride's mother then applied vermilion powder in a tika or dot on his forehead and circled him with a tray carrying rice grains, a ghee lamp, a coconut (which is broken open at the door to ward off evil spirits and encourage the entrance of good ones) and flowers. The bride then entered, received a similar welcome and exchanged garlands with the groom. Various rituals followed: washing the bride's feet with milk to welcome her into her husband's home, reciting vows, listening to chants, the application of vermilion powder to the bride's hair, walking around the flame in the center of the altar while repeating vows, tying them together with a string. To shorten the ceremony, they reduced the number of fire walks from the usual seven which can extend the ceremony typically to three hours.

The sangeet was also a twist on tradition, taking place the following weekend in Delhi instead of before the ceremony. This is the party event and what a party it is. It took place in a vast, open field starting at noon and lasting all night. The outer corners were lined with buffet tables crammed with chafing dishes of regional Indian, vegetarian and international dishes. Guests dressed in their brightest saris and lehengas (a long, full skirt and matching tight, midriff baring blouse) entered to drummers and witnessed another emotional ceremony with the bride and groom exchanging vows under a veil while being pelted with rose petals. Then after a few hours of mingling, the dancing began.

One after another, the groups came up—friends of the bride, friends of the groom, the mother of the bride and her friends, the bride’s cousins in several waves and finally the bride and groom—performing Bollywood style dances in such tight synchronization that it seemed that several had to be professionals or at least have practiced together for months. In fact, many had flown in from other cities and countries and learned their parts from videos without rehearsing together at all. But the sheer exuberance, warm feelings and great moves propelled the dancers, earning cheers from the crowd and the appreciative bride who mimicked some of their moves. And later everyone got on the dance floor, dancing for hours in a joyous celebration.

Surprisingly, that wasn’t even our last wedding. While staying in another favorite hotel, [Sujan Rajmahal Palace](#) in Jaipur, the maharaja’s former palace for parties and guests (including Jacqueline Kennedy and Queen Elizabeth II, whose suites now carry their names and are available to guests) we heard loud music coming from next door. A very wealthy local family was having a gargantuan wedding so a staff member called to ask if we could drop in and then led us over; their sangeet featured professional Bollywood performers in a seriously choreographed show. We observed a few minutes of a very traditional wedding in one of the salons of another favorite hotel, the [Leela Palace New Delhi](#). And while staying at [Raas Devigarh](#), an 18th century palace

New Delhi. And while staying at [Raas Devigarh](#), an 18th century palace in the Aravalli Hills outside of Udaipur, we joined in the celebration in the neighboring village of Delwara where it seemed the entire village was dancing in the street. They were all very different events but confirmation that any wedding in India is an experience that shouldn't be missed.