



WEDDING TOURISM AND INDIA

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Abstract

Wedding Tourism – a seemingly new form of Tourism is causing a lot of excitement in the tourism industry. In some cases it is also referred to as “Marriage Tourism” or “Destination Wedding”. Whatever maybe the way one addresses this phenomenon, it is for sure that we cannot ignore this new trend in the tourism sector.

According to the bridal magazine, Conde Nast Bridal Group’s survey, globally wedding tourism has seen a growth of 400% in the past 10 years. Globalisation and a growing interest in each other’s culture is probably one of the primary reasons for this trend. The people world over are attracted to say their “I Do” in some unique way or at an exotic location. Europe based couples are known to fly overseas to destinations like Las Vegas, Hawaii, the Caribbean and Cyprus in order to marry. No wonder these destinations rank among the favourites.

India as a country is one of the beneficiaries of this new trend. Both NRIs and foreigners are choosing an Indian wedding, with all its traditional rituals and interesting locales. The already booming Indian wedding industry, with a revenue of Rs.50,000 /- crore per annum and

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a growth rate of 25% per year, is looking for ways to tie up with leading hotels and travel agents to woo this growing tourist segment. Although, in India, it is difficult to come across the exact statistics and figures regarding this tourism sector, nevertheless we cannot ignore this segment.

This paper is an attempt to understand this concept of wedding tourism. The paper also examines the possible reasons for its growing popularity and its role in creating other business avenues for the travel and hospitality and allied industries, such as wedding resorts and others. The scope of wedding tourism in India is also explored.

Introduction

Wedding Tourism, as the name suggests, is a plan of travelling to another place, preferably abroad, in order to get married. In India, wedding tourism as a concept is nothing new. After all, the bridegroom's family is known to travel with relatives and friends to the bride's place of residence for solemnizing the marriage. Confusion arises as we are using many terms to refer to a single form of travel.

In India, Marriage Tourism is the term officially used by all, even by the Ministry of Tourism and Media. Tourism minister, Ambika Soni, mentioned "Marriage Tourism" in the speech at the inaugural ceremony of the International Tourism Bourse – Berlin, held between 7-11 March'07 in Berlin (Times of India, National Edition, 9th March'07). Whereas in the West, traveling some distance or abroad in order to get married is referred to as Wedding Tourism or Destination Wedding. In case of Destination Wedding, Destination is just as important as the ritual of getting married. Some scholars have also used the term wedding moons to talk about getting married abroad as the destination of wedding is also the honeymoon destination. No wonder with so many terms in use for the seemingly same form of travel, it creates a lot of confusion about the correct term to use for this form of travel.

As we know, wedding is for a day while Marriage is for a lifetime. According to the Oxford dictionary Marriage means "a legal union of a man and women for cohabitation and often procreation". Marriage is also referred to as "the act or ceremony marking such cohabitation". The Oxford dictionary meaning of Wedding is "the marriage ceremony". Since both marriage and wedding are referred to as "ceremony", therefore everyone uses both wedding and marriage interchangeably. Considering this fact, we can say that Wedding tourism is when one travels to get

married in an exotic location in a unique manner irrespective of the legalities of this union in their own country or the destination of wedding. Probably that is one of the reasons couples opt for a legal union in their country of residence before or after a dream destination wedding. Whereas, Marriage Tourism would be about getting married in a ceremony well recognized in the legal terms, at least in the destination of wedding. Although the terms Wedding Tourism or Destination Wedding are more in tune with tourism, in this paper, the terms wedding tourism, destination wedding as well as marriage tourism would be used as synonyms.

Wedding Tourism and the Global Scenario

The growing popularity of Wedding Tourism can be gauged from the fact that in 2003 UNWTO was requested by the Maldives to formulate laws for the marriage of foreign nationals in the country. Maldives, a very popular wedding tourism destination; follows the Islamic family laws for the marriage and its registration for its citizens. It was felt by the officials of Maldives that although, it was always a popular destination, it was losing out on major revenue as foreign nationals were unable to get married and register their marriage under the Islamic laws. On the request of the government officials of Maldives, a “technical assistance mission” from UNWTO visited Maldives, and reviewed its legal framework related to marriage laws of the country. Finally a draft piece of legislation- “Foreign Tourist Marriage Act 2003” was proposed by the team to enable foreign and non – Islamic tourists to register their marriages in Maldives.

Dubai, another wedding destination, is also booming as a destination. Wedding and tourism industry are considered to be the fastest growing industries of Dubai. The travel and leisure industry of Dubai has realized that wedding tourism is “war proof”. The invasion of Iraq by USA led to the cancellation of most of the corporate bookings but the hotels survived due to the wedding bookings. For example, during April 2003, 75% of the banquet revenue at Hotel Ritz – Carlton came from weddings. After all, no one has time to wait for the war to get over, in order to get married. Although the destinations in question are in Asia, we find that Maldives is a popular destination for those couples who wish to travel to exotic locales for getting married while the wedding tourism business of Dubai is somewhat different. Since most of the young population of Dubai consists of the expatriates from Asia and Europe, initially this section of young population traveled back home like India to get married. Nowadays, with the increase in the number of “Cocktail Marriages”, wherein people with different nationalities get married, Dubai has become the ideal marriage destination. The family and friends of the couple fly from Asia or Europe into Dubai to be a part of the wedding celebrations, and thus earn revenues for the concerned industries.

Another reason for the growth of Wedding Tourism is the marketing concept used in Dubai, i.e. of supply – led demand, build it and they will come. Therefore in the past couple of years, Dubai has seen the growth of world-class wedding resorts and hotels with the banquet facilities for getting married. First to lead was Hotel Royal Mirage opened in the year 2000, which is a spectacular wedding venue with its lavish architectural beauty in the form of a Moroccan Palace. In the year 2001, another wedding resort was opened, Ritz Carlton with landscaped gardens especially for weddings (www.ameinfo.com).

The potential of wedding tourism can be understood by the simple fact that almost all the national tourism websites talk about wedding destinations in their country as well as about the traditions and rituals of getting married. For example, a small destination like Belize is promoting its Mayan Ceremonial Sites, Tropical Gardens and Private Beaches as Wedding Destinations. The Belize Tourism Board promotes itself as “Unforgettable location for Unforgettable Day” (www.travelbelize.org).

Wedding Tourism: A Classification

Classification of Wedding Tourism would no doubt help us in identifying our target tourist groups. Essentially, we come across two kinds of wedding tourism:-

Destination Wedding: One travels to a dream destination like Hawaii or New Zealand and gets married. The locale and scenic beauty plays an important role in choosing the destination. Along with it, the legal procedures and the laws governing the marriage of foreign tourists as well as the marriage rituals and customs of the locals play an important role.

Unique or Exotic Wedding Ceremony: The adventure seekers as well as the romantics prefer getting married in a manner unlike the traditional wedding ceremonies. For example, getting married in an underwater ceremony or in a hot air balloon or while bungee jumping. All cities do not have provision and facilities of getting married in a special manner. Therefore, one has to travel to some special destination, which will offer this kind of facility. One such destination is Trang in Southern Thailand, which offers the guests a chance to get married in an underwater wedding ceremony. Originally, this concept was launched by Thai International Airways as a novel concept to promote tourism to Trang. It was first held on Valentine’s Day of the year 2000, wherein 30 couples from 28 countries took their vows in an underwater wedding ceremony to create a new Guinness World Record. Today this underwater marriage ceremony has become an annual affair to showcasing the Thai wedding ceremony. To be eligible for this ceremony the couples interested, their family, relatives and friends are required to be certified divers (www.tourismthailand.org)

Reasons for Growing Popularity

The modern world finds every popular event or frequent query being answered in the Internet. The internet has become a mine of information regarding the activities related to wedding tourism. Many discussion groups and self-help/ do-it-yourself sites like www.ultimatewedding.com and others give couples ways and means to plan their destination wedding. Some interesting queries and their answers are mentioned below:-

Why to go for a destination wedding? – Offers a chance to be creative, less extra curricular activities- pre and post wedding.

How to choose a destination? – Either a completely new destination or a much beloved family vacation destination.

Which legal issues to consider? – How to register marriage in a foreign country.

How many guests? – Small and intimate or big and grand, how to make their travel and accommodation plans, how many guests will turn up.

Whether to go for an all-inclusive wedding resort - where much of the food and beverage expense is part of the lodging costs or *do-it-yourself* in bits and pieces.

Activities for the guests – Minimal entertainment for the guests, as in pre and post wedding celebration as it will be a new destination, which everyone would love to explore.

The above-mentioned queries give us a basic idea about the requirements and needs of the couples flying to a destination for getting married. Considering the amount of interest wedding tourism is creating, we also need to understand the cause of this recent trend. Some of the possible causes for the growing popularity are discussed below:

Runaway couples - Young couples are known to defy parents and elope to get married. Many a times, groups of friends accompany them for this wedding. This is a universal concept. After all, in USA couples head towards Las Vegas to get married whenever they are in a hurry. Even celebrities, like pop singer Britney Spears who got married for the first time in Las Vegas where she had traveled to with her friends, are known to get married in Las Vegas without the grandeur to save time and escape from the media.

Exotic Marriage Rituals – Exotic weddings rituals and traditions entice people to travel long distances. Traveling to a place like Hawaii where one can wear flip-flops and get married in a private beach makes the wedding a more laid back and relaxed affair than a more formal one.

Many travel to India and get married according to the Hindu rituals in places like Jaipur, Pushkar and Udaipur. Essentially, these weddings are for NRI couples or one of the partners is a NRI i.e. Cocktail wedding or Foreigners who are ready to experience the Indian kind of wedding and marriage rituals specially to be blessed for a happy married life. Some couples take marriage vows in a unique manner because they have complete faith in the Indian ceremony, as a lady has said that the European marriages are not very stable and therefore she was having an Indian ritual to have a stable married life (www.news.bbc.co.uk).

Unique Experience – The more adventurous couples like to take their vows in special locations in an extraordinary manner, busy in an activity both of them enjoy. Getting married in a Hot Air Balloon or while Sky Diving or Bungee Jumping and as mentioned earlier, Underwater.

Legalities – The laws of the state also encourages couples to get married in a place other than their own place of residence. This is especially true in the case of same – sex - marriages.

Globally, only a few countries permit and accept same sex couples and fewer still give them the legal right to marry with the benefits of a married couple. The case of Portland Tourism in USA is an interesting study. The ailing economy of Portland was revived after the local tourism website promoted that “Gay Marriage rule made legal in Multnomah County” (www.oregonlive.com). Large out -of - town groups started traveling to Portland, which consisted primarily of lesbian and gay population. Usually the gay population has an above average tendency to travel and also has more disposable income. This makes them a particularly attractive group of tourists (www.boston.com). D’Alessandro, President, Portland Oregon Visitors Association, stated that a positive impact especially on the economy was felt since gay marriages were made legal in the state. The restaurant and accommodation business in particular has felt the maximum increase and this has resulted in many special packages for gay couples, including free champagne toast on showing marriage license (www.oregonlive.com). The gay marriage tourism also has a positive side effect as it is sending a message to all travelers that Portland is a very hospitable place since it welcomes each and every group.

Another state of USA, Massachusetts, where Tourism is the third largest industry of the state and annually more than \$11 billion is earned from tourism, has also felt

increase in tourists flow once they made Gay marriages legal. It was estimated that revenues to the tune of \$1 billion could possibly be earned in three years from the gay marriage tourism in USA.

However, all the countries legalizing gay marriages are not looking forward to the increasing tourist traffic. In the year 2000, when for the very first time the open society of Netherlands made gay marriages legal, the bill spoke about marriage tourism. Special provision was made so that these marriages were permissible only to people with residency permits or were citizens, till further amendments. This shows that laws of a nation often motivate one to marry in a destination.

Another law that helps in choosing a destination away from Europe and America is the legal process of *Divorce* in the Asian countries. For example according to the Indian legal system, in case of divorce, the division of the material wealth is partial to the man. (Times of India, National Edition, 04th Dec'06)

Expenses – Economics i.e. cost plays a major role in choosing destination wedding over traditional western wedding. Some destinations are less expensive than others. A sit down marriage in a destination like India is almost five times less expensive than in the USA. (Times of India, National Edition, 04th Dec'06)

Special all inclusive marriage resorts costs less and the wedding service is also free if the bride and the groom stay there for a certain number of nights. (www.sandals.com). In some cases even the wedding reception party is also included in the package.

Wedding Tourism and the Scope of India

The Indian wedding is already very popular with both NRIs as well as Foreign Tourists. Some foreign tourists believe that the sacred rituals of Hindu Marriage will help their marriage last longer. (www.news.bbc.co.uk) The Ministry of Tourism website has a few pages dedicated to the various Indian Wedding ceremonies and its rituals, a call to the wedding tourism. In order to promote India as a Wedding Destination, Ministry of Tourism even organized a mock Indian wedding in a special flower decked mandap for a willing German couple during the International Tourism Bourse in Berlin (Times of India, National Edition, 9th March'07)

After Goa, the most popular wedding tourism destination in India is Rajasthan (Hindustan Times, Lucknow Edition, 24th Feb'08); with its grand forts, palaces and havelis. These days Kerala is also very much in demand. The state of Rajasthan has become a wedding hub with over 20 NRI marriages to be held in Jaipur

between November 2006 and March 2007 (www.xtraedition.indiatimes.com). The tour operators and event management companies are offering royal Weddings in the cities like Udaipur, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur and Jaipur. At the same time, the holy Pushkar remains a favourite with many tourists. The wedding of British Actress - Model Liz Hurley with her Indian beau Arun Nayar in the Umaid Bhavan Palace Hotel of Udaipur in March'07 followed by two more functions in Rajasthan; in Hotel Balsamand Palace, 5 Kms from Umaid Bhavan and third function in the 4th century Nagaur Fort (Times of India, National Edition, February 2007) showcased Rajasthan as an important wedding destination, therefore increasing its demand. Many celebrities from the Mumbai film industry have also got married in the beautiful Palaces of Rajasthan, thus triggering the imagination of the common man. The possible reason for the popularity of Rajasthan lies in its accommodation, accessibility and transportation facilities. A large number of heritage hotels of different budget range offer a varied scope for destination wedding. One can go for Udaipur where it costs almost Rs.20,000/- per person per night while Jaipur and Jodhpur are less expensive (Hindustan Times, Lucknow Edition, 24th Feb'08). The other popular destination as expected is Goa. The reason for Goa's popularity is the cost factor. Compared to Rajasthan, Goa is even less expensive (The Times of India, national Edition, 04th December 2006).

The beautiful locales of the State of Kerala are so much in demand for wedding tourism that the Principal Secretary, Kerala Tourism already has plans to market Kerala abroad as an exotic destination for marriages and Munnar as a honeymoon destination (The Hindu, Online Edition, 22nd August 2005). Other popular destinations include the holy city of Varanasi. Sahara's Ambi Valley and Mahabaleshwar are also gaining popularity among both Indians and NRIs (Times of India, National Edition, 26th November 2006).

The popularity of India as a destination would no doubt profit the tourism Industry the maximum as generally in an NRI wedding the ratio of foreigners to Indians is 7:3. Plus the average cost of a wedding here ranges anything from Rs.5 lakh upwards. An NRI wedding arranged by the Harjai wedding planners in February 2007 approximately cost Rs.3crores. (Times of India, National Edition, 26th November 2006). This means lots of opportunities for the business of wedding to flourish. Omaxe Construction Company is constructing a Mall dedicated to the Indian Weddings on the Gurgaon – Sohna road. This will cater to both the domestic as well as the Wedding Tourists. This Theme Mall will be providing all the services associated with wedding from attire, jewellery, entertainment, beverage, wedding planner, tour operator and others, all except accommodation.

There is a need for India to be seen on the global scene as a major wedding destination along with places like the Caribbean and Europe with its castles. In the

long run both tourism and wedding industry will benefit. In India marriages are dependant on auspicious days, which leaves the wedding industry relatively free for a few months every year. Wedding tourism can be offered as special packages during these lean months to foreigners. At the same time we have varied cultural and ritualistic differences from state to state which can be showcased and presented to the tourists. Although while preparing the packages we should remember that food and beverage might have some touch of the country of residence.

Conclusion and Suggestions

There is no doubt that Wedding Tourism is one of the latest trends in the Tourism Industry and to maximize India's chance in the global scenario we need to act fast. There are a few things we need to ponder upon:

Many reports and media articles are being written about this phenomenon yet there are no exact figures regarding the wedding industry, and therefore the possible revenues to be earned from the wedding tourism in India. Even the ministry of tourism does not have an account of the efforts being undertaken, especially by the overseas offices to promote wedding tourism.

Exclusive packages for Wedding Tourism clients should be prepared depending upon the nationality of the couple. For example, an NRI couple might prefer a wedding ritual at the city of their forefathers whereas in the case of a cocktail wedding where one of the partner is from India, their idea would be to showcase the best of his / her traditions. And when the couples are foreigners, the marriage ritual and the location should not be so very alien that they are completely lost.

The concept of handing over the details of a family wedding to a stranger i.e. wedding planner is still not quite acceptable among the middle class in India. We have many event management companies and wedding planners who are handling wedding tourism in India dealing primarily with the tourists coming to India from abroad. The need of the hour is to forge better linkage between the Travel and Tourism Industry with the Wedding Industry, something, which is already visible in the case of MICE.

There is a need of aggressive marketing of the different scenic and grand locales of India along with the rituals of a wedding ceremony. There is a need to stress on the fact that one can get married in style in India in less than half the expense of that in the West. The internet today is the answer to every query that one has and personal experience on the search engines show that Indian wedding destinations are way behind the Caribbean, Castles of Scotland, Romantic wedding at Italy and scenic

wedding in New Zealand, to name a few major competitors in the wedding tourism business.

Resorts, which cater exclusively to the needs of the wedding tourists, are not very visible in India. Although tour operators offer packages to Rajasthan for wedding Tourism, yet they do not truly showcase the culture of India. For example, in Hawaii special resorts are available which provide all the services required to have a dream wedding with extra facilities like free wedding reception, food and lodging of the guests also various themes of getting married like on the beach, chapel and others. We can also offer packages with popular themes like Royal wedding of Rajasthan, Punjab Village wedding or a Vedic Wedding ritual or a South Indian Wedding in the morning or a Goan carnival wedding in exclusive wedding resorts.

Explaining the ritual of Indian marriage would reaffirm the trust of western tourists in the Indian wedding rituals and also understand the meaning of the different rituals, which would give them a feeling of understanding the wedding ceremony. Now they get the feeling of sacredness without actually understanding everything that is going on. The marriage customs attached with the different regions of the country would also increase the scope of wedding tourism as it would give the wedding tourists a chance to draw plans for their dream wedding by mixing the different customs, traditions or wedding clothes of different regions, of their choice.

There is a need to look into the legal angle of marriage of the foreign nationals. New provisions with the help of the UNWTO, as in the case of Maldives, may help promote our country better. The legalities would also help couples, as most of them have to get married twice once in India and once in their own country of residence. The laws will help sort out legal problems in the case of a divorce.

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