



SAYING 'I DO' IN SRI LANKA

As destination weddings become a global trend, find out how you can tap into one of the fastest growing tourism segments.

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Photo credit: Amaranth Lifestyle Media

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At the annual Destination Wedding Planners Congress held last year in Los Cabos, Mexico, it was estimated that the destination wedding industry amounted to a whopping \$90 billion, representing 25% of the global wedding market. In an article carried by *TravelDailyNews*, it was reported that North and Central America makes up the world's largest destination wedding market, with an overall value of \$27 billion, closely followed by Asia valued at \$19.8

billion and amounting to 22%.

In a survey conducted by *Sunshine.co.uk*, Sri Lanka was ranked ninth for destination weddings, between Sicily and Florida. *Wedding Ideas*, Britain's largest bridal magazine, has also featured the island as a hot new venue, building Sri Lanka's reputation as a top choice.

Unlike hosting Sri Lankan weddings, destination weddings come with its own set of unique requests and challenges. In order to attract the right clientele, the island's hospitality sector needs to be aware of and prepared to navigate these demands. We spoke to various stakeholders who have played a role in the destination wedding segment to provide a better understanding to those who are interested in getting into the industry.

Sri Lanka is a favoured destination



MAGICAL MOMENTS' ability to offer personalised themes for each couple is one of their key drivers of success

for many European, Australian and, more recently, Indian expat and native couples looking to tie the knot in a foreign country. The country's south coast in particular proves to be the first choice of many who idolise the concept of a beach wedding. Unlike the popular Sri Lankan wedding held at large hotel banquet halls, most foreign couples who select the island are interested in a smaller, bespoke celebration. The requirements of this niche clientele fit in perfectly with the concept of boutique hotels and villas who pride themselves in providing a personalised service. However, for Indian weddings, which consist of several ceremonies and events that continue for days, the choice of venues at larger resorts such as Shangri-La Hambantota and Taj Bentota is far more appealing.

COMPATIBILITY

Wedding planners like Charm De Silva, founder of Magical Moments and Henri Tatham, celebrant and owner of Kikili Enterprise, emphasise that the partnership between the hotel and wedding planner plays a crucial role in organising successful destination weddings. They both unambiguously echo that "communication and transparency are absolutely vital" to maintain a great working partnership.

Charm De Silva, originally from a marketing and merchandising background, quit her job at Brandix in 2012 in order to kick-start her lifelong dream of becoming a wedding planner. De Silva's reputation



as one of the most-sought-after professionals in the island is a testament to her meticulous approach to planning and coordinating weddings. Currently in her sixth year organising weddings along with her husband, Shamal, who comes from an IT background, the De Silvas take the business of organising dream weddings very seriously.

Having worked with couples from all over the globe across various locations in Sri Lanka, it is her view that hotels who are in the business need to pick up their pace. De Silva says “quick responses to wedding enquiries, flexibility in venue policies, and training staff to handle the demands of a destination weddings” are key areas for improvement. However, certain hotels and travel agents are taking the responsibility of planning destination weddings. De Silva feels that they need to prioritise what they do best and leave organising destination weddings to the professionals as it requires a special set of skills and expertise that everyone may not have.

Based just outside Galle Fort, Henri Tatham wears multiple hats, from the proprietor of Kikili House, Kikili Beach and owner of Kikili Enterprises, to that of a celebrant. Her infectious bubblyness has been instrumental in officiating the marriage of 220 couples, of which the majority were destination weddings. Tatham first visited Sri Lanka on holiday in 2001. When she was offered a job at the newly established Sun House under Taprobane Properties a year later, she took a leap of faith, quit her

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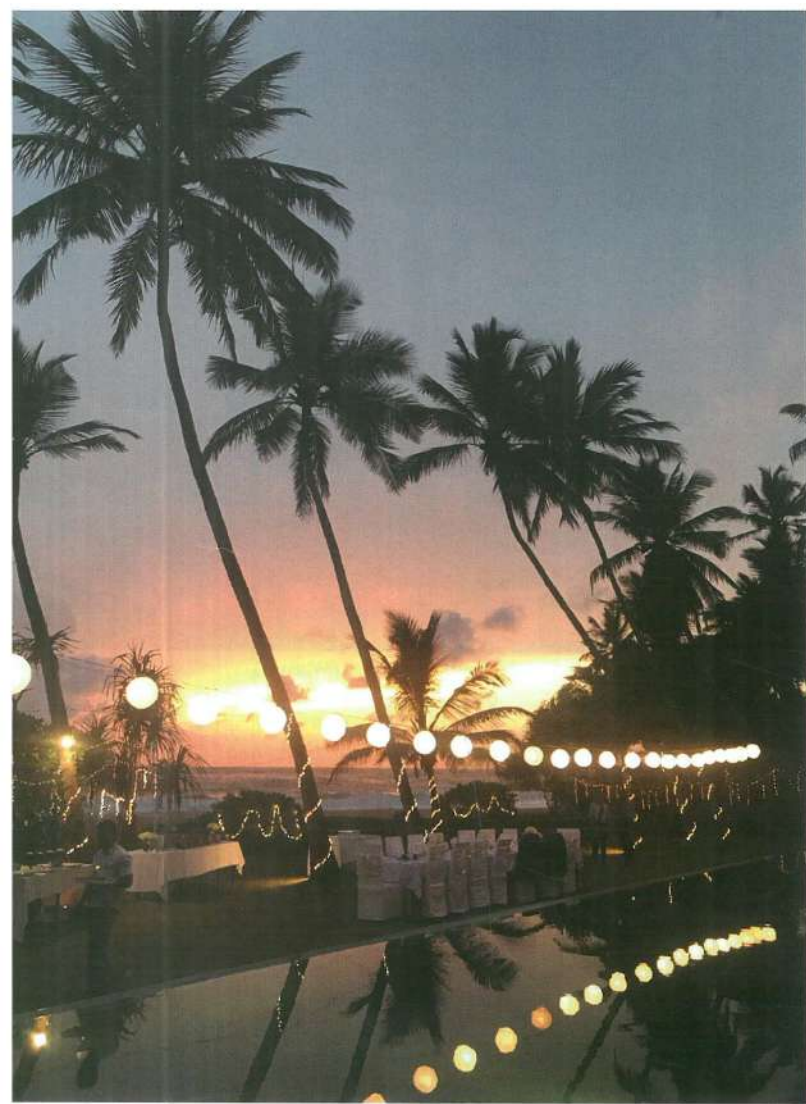
job in PR and moved to the island. During her time at Sun House, Tatham who is fondly known by her friends as ‘Hen’, had to officiate a wedding when the local vicar was unable to perform his duties due to an accident. After realising that she enjoyed marrying people, in 2012, Tatham trained and registered herself at the Fellowship of Professional Celebrant in the UK, thereby receiving the official nod to preside weddings, funerals and naming ceremonies.

Apart from her role as a celebrant, Tatham also organises small-scale destination weddings and parties through her venture – Fluff and Puff. “Couples who

select Sri Lanka as a wedding destination are looking for something special and personalised, so hotels need to be able to offer different styles that appeal to this clientele,” says Tatham. She emphasises that those hotels interested in entering the destination wedding segment need to have a thorough understanding of the demands and styles of a personalised destination wedding.

Due to limited space, and unlike large resorts, many boutique hotels and villas require couples to book the property for a minimum of two to three nights. Hoteliers include this as a policy in order to ensure that their regular guests aren’t disturbed and that the wedding planners and crew have sufficient time to set up and clear out the premises. At the other end of the scale, for larger resorts like the Shangri-La Hambantota, complete hotel buyouts are rare. The hotel’s numerous venue offerings provide sufficient space to host a wedding without interrupting other hotel guests.

The Villa Bentota – a 15-bedroom boutique hotel under the Paradise Road Collection – has hosted destination weddings since 2010. Daham Panangala, the Resident Manager of the hotel, says that typically they host six to eight weddings each year but by April of this year, they have organised five so far. Renowned for its high standards and food, due to Paradise Road owner Shanth Fernando’s eye for finesse, the hotel only handles the catering and service aspect of a wedding. The rest is organised by the wedding planner. “There



3 TIPS FOR HOTELS TO ATTRACT MORE INDIAN DESTINATION WEDDINGS

by Hemant Dadlani, Managing Director of The Banquet Company

1. Practice flexibility - Indian celebrations can continue till the wee hours of the morning, so hotels need to be flexible with their house rules and policies if they want to make headway in hosting more Indian destination weddings.

2. More food! - Like any wedding, food plays a huge role in Indian weddings. While most Indians love Sri Lankan cuisine, hotels need to be diverse in their food offerings and ensure they include Indian comfort food to complete the Indian wedding experience.

3. Overall picture - When it comes to Indian weddings, hotels need to look at the overall revenue instead of focusing on individual departmental revenues. Indian weddings bring in on average over 200 guests. If hotels focus only on room rates or the food and beverage cost instead of how much the total revenue a wedding brings, they are losing out on the bigger picture.

was one wedding that was organised by the couple themselves and we saw how stressed they were. Since then, we always recommend that a wedding planner is involved. It makes everything easier for the couple as well as for us. If the couple doesn't know anyone, we recommend a professional wedding planner we have worked with in the past," Panangala highlighted.

On the flipside, for smaller properties such as Sri Villas, working with the couple directly is preferred instead of through a wedding planner. Located on the Bentota coastline, Sri Villas comprises three villas that used to operate independently but changed its strategy a few years ago to accommodate room-only and villa bookings depending on the season. Popular with guests who want to spend milestone birthdays in Sri Lanka, the property has



Photo credits: Paradise Road Villa Bentota



"Most destination weddings in the south held at small properties can't take on the added responsibility of catering another event; that's when we step in"

- Julia Dance

MEETING CLIENT EXPECTATIONS is one of the most crucial factors in catering a destination wedding



also organised and hosted several destination weddings. Resident Manager Caroline McKay says that, in the last two years, they have organised four weddings in total. The villa can accommodate up to 18 adults and can host up to 80 people for an event. McKay says, "Most guests who want to have their wedding at our property are easygoing and aware of the logistics, which makes it easier to work with them directly so that we can cater to their needs." To encourage direct enquiries, Sri Villas has advertised several wedding packages on their official website.

HOW'S THE FOOD?

Panangala, who has overseen all the weddings held at The Villa Bentota says that navigating guest expectations around food has been one of their biggest challenges. Although the boutique hotel organises a sample tasting for the couple once they have decided on the menu, there are bound to be last minute changes which can be "difficult to coordinate, especially if we're trying to prepare a sit down meal for 120 people."

As the wedding party most often stays

at the venue, cocktails before the big day and midnight snacks after the event have become a norm. The Villa Bentota and Sri Villas all offer a host of activities their guests can partake in during their time at the venue or in the country. Both properties offer additional food and beverage options to maximise revenue.

For Julia Dance, the founder of The Fabulous Food Factory, fringe events around wedding celebrations such as welcome cocktails, dinners and post-events have provided a business opportunity in catering. Dance left her career in HR and business development in the UK and moved to Sri Lanka in 2012 a few years after she too came to the island on holiday. Since setting up the company at the end of last year, The Fabulous Food Factory has worked alongside wedding planners and catered several events at villas in and around Galle. "Many of the destination weddings in the south are held at small properties who can't take on the added responsibility of catering another event, so that's when my team and I step in," says Dance. Mindful of the fine line she has to steer as a supplier to a property with an existing kitchen staff, Dance supplies her own equipment and tools to maintain a good relationship with the property.

LASTING PARTNERSHIPS

Both De Silva and Tatham say that they have seen an increase in the number of destination weddings in Sri Lanka as well as the number of enquiries they have received for this year. "When I first launched the company, I made sure that we had a very good website with all the details but my first enquiry came through a recommendation," says De Silva. Word of mouth and



Photo credits: The Fabulous Food Factory

Photo credits: Sri Villas



ners to couples, planners also recommend hotels and villas to clients to suit their style and budget.

Tamarind Hill, a boutique hotel located inland of Galle, is another preferred venue among wedding planners and couples. Nihal Jayasinghe, Resident Manager of the property, says that while many of their enquiries come through wedding planners, as the hotel is under Asia Leisure Hotels, they also have a corporate team that has annual targets.

Funny stories from destination weddings

1. When the bridal gown had not arrived at the day of the wedding, the bride confidently borrowed her friend's black dress and wore it for her wedding.
2. A couple had wanted an elephant present at their wedding, but the entrance to the property was through a railway line and the elephant was determined not to move. Despite the couple's insistence that the elephant should be moved, no one including the mahout could change the elephant's mind. So the ceremony and wedding proceeded without the elephant. This was also the last time the property hosted an elephant on their premises.
3. Prior to the wedding, the best man was completely naked except for a hat covering his private parts. He walked across the property while the staff was setting up to deliver a message from the groom to the bride, who was at the opposite corner of the villa.



recommendations play a fundamental role in destination weddings. While Magical Moments generate a sizeable number of enquiries from their official website and Instagram account, De Silva still feels that recommendations has brought in the most business.

Two years ago, after renowned Bollywood actress Deepika Padukone attended her friend's wedding at The Villa Bentota, the boutique hotel received several enquiries for future Indian weddings. According to Panangala, they receive 60-80 wedding enquiries for a year and says that there's definitely demand for the destination wedding market considering the last five years. Just as hotels recommend wedding plan-

In an industry that is dependent on recommendations and the mutual beneficial relationship between hoteliers and wedding planners, hotels are cautioned to exercise transparency in their policies and costs. Several hotels have gotten into the habit of agreeing to weddings unconditionally and thereafter imposing hidden costs and policies once the clients have signed the agreement. This creates mistrust on the onset of a partnership between hotels, wedding planners and guests. As an industry that is heavily dependent on recommendations, hoteliers need to maintain transparency to avoid negative feedback that could damage their reputation concerning destination weddings. ☑