

Celeb weddings in the time of Covid

SWAPNIL JOGLEKAR
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On April 26, the day India recorded 323,023 new Covid cases, Phagwara in Punjab saw the private wedding ceremony of actor-comedian duo Sugandha Mishra and Sanket Bhosale. Mishra, dressed in a cream *lehenga* with heavy embroidery, entered in a chariot held aloft by men wearing masks. As she descended, the scene was engulfed in mystic fog and she tied the knot with Bhosale. In attendance were their close friends and family. Though she was later booked for allegedly flouting coronavirus norms at her wedding, the rich are following a template for their special day—an intimate ceremony, with fewer people and a keen eye for a touch of luxury in every aspect.

Take, for instance, Dia Mirza. The actor wanted her wedding with businessperson Vaibhav Rekhi on February 15 to be “environmentally sustainable” and, true to the theme, in a vintage Indian garden. So, that’s what Aash Studio’s Aashna Saran, who managed the wedding design and florals, did.

Mirza was pleased and later wrote on Instagram: “The garden where I have spent every morning for the past 19 years was an absolutely magical setting... for our simple and soulful ceremony!”

Celebrity weddings in the time of Covid have shrunk in size but not in grandeur. An elegant and personally curated ceremony that reflects their values in Instagram-worthy light is the flavour of the season.

“No one wants to pay a celebrity a crore to perform for five minutes at their wedding anymore,” says Divinity Weddings’ Natasha Katgara Gocal, who planned Mirza’s wedding.

While RT-PCR tests and temperature checks for all have become common before entering the *mandap*, foreign wedding destinations such as Turkey and Italy have fallen out of favour. Due to uncertainties over air travel and the fear of quarantine, the well-heeled are choosing palatial properties in



Actor Dia Mirza and businessman Vaibhav Rekhi’s wedding on February 15 had an ‘environmentally sustainable’ theme

Rajasthan instead.

From the venue and bridal couture to jewellery and decor, Covid-19 has changed everything in the luxury wedding space. Pre-pandemic, India was a promising market for all luxury goods, pegged at \$8 billion by a 2020 Statista report. But now, people are looking to spend more on top-shelf products, some of which can become a family heirloom.

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Celebrity fashion designer



Sari brand Kankatala, which is based out of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, has seen a strong response throughout the pandemic. “We shipped at least one sari costing more than ₹1 lakh every day through our online portal,” says Anirudh Kankatala, director, Kankatala Sarees. “In South India, it is essential that a bride wear a Kanchipuram. The quality of a Kanchipuram sari symbolises the status of the family.”

Textile and apparel major Raymond, which caters to luxury clients through its brands like Made to Measure, saw its business in metro cities jump to 85 per cent of the pre-Covid level in November 2020 with the start of the wedding season. “Grooms are not shying away

from highlighting their roots,” says Joe Kuruvilla, CEO, Raymond Lifestyle.

With the focus now entirely on the bride and the groom, what they wear has become even more important. Celebrity fashion designer Manish Malhotra, who designed actor Varun Dhawan’s *sherwani* for his January 24 wedding with

bridal fashion designer Natasha Dalal, finds today’s couple astutely aware of what they want. “(Due to the pandemic) I found myself doing a lot of online consultations and I thoroughly loved the process,” Malhotra says.

Another big draw is India’s ever-growing love for jewellery. India contributes 29 per cent to global jewellery consumption, according to the Indian Gems and Jewellery Industry Report 2021. Some of India’s biggest luxe jewellers saw most of the spending routed away from the usual extravagance of a 1,000-people wedding into buying gold jewellery.

Bloomberg calculations showed gold imports during the first three months of 2021 more than doubled over the same period last year. “People saw it as better value for their money,” says Rajiv Popley of Popley & Sons Jewellers, a Mumbai-based lifestyle and jewellery retailer.

A new addition to fashion accessories has been masks and mask chains. For Shobha Shringar Jewellers, which has its outlet in the swanky South

Flavours of the season

► Curated ceremony in a private mansion or a palace/heritage haveli in Rajasthan

► Virtual consultations with fashion designers and wedding planners

► High-end jewellery such as gold, diamond necklaces and platinum bands

► Gold- or diamond-studded masks

► Instead of imposing structures, luxuries such as personal concierge and Instagram-worthy entrance for bride and groom

► Wedding websites with e-ushers

► Pictures and details about the celebrity weddings carefully vetted and packaged in a personal post from social media handles

Mumbai area, gold- or diamond-studded masks starting from ₹2 lakh have been a big hit. Diamond necklaces, platinum bands and solitaire couple rings continue to be major sellers. While the jewellery market saw some upheaval, the luxury wedding space remained untouched with people spending between ₹5 lakh and ₹1 crore on ornaments, says Ishu Datwani, founder, Anmol Jewellers, a Mumbai-based luxury jewellery brand.

TV presenter Sanjana Ganesan wore an Anmol diamond necklace for her private reception after her March 15 wedding with cricketer Jasprit Bumrah. It was emblematic of a larger trend of intimate wedding ceremonies. You wouldn’t have a crane bringing down a 10-kg cake anymore as people’s aesthetics have changed, say industry experts.

“People want to get into detailing. (They ask me) what fabric are you using? Are the flowers used grown sustainably? Earlier their concern was that the ceremony should be loud and happening,” says Priyanka Sharma, a wedding curator from Jaipur.

The booking window for events has shrunk too, from five-six months to just a month or two before the date. “Our guests are looking for more flexibility, from planning to accommodating last-minute changes,” says Chandrashekar Joshi, general manager at The Leela Palace Jaipur.

IHCL, one of the major play-

ers in the hospitality segment, has seen great demand for its regal properties such as Rambagh Palace (Jaipur), Umair Bhawan Palace (Jodhpur) and Taj Lake Palace (Udaipur).

SaffronStays, which manages private vacation homes in India, has also seen its villas snapped up for cocktail parties, *mehendi* and *haldi* ceremonies. Many high-net-worth individuals are hosting weddings at their family mansions. The privacy and the space these places offer has been key, say experts.

Wedding websites with virtual rooms and RSVP managers have also become more important in a changed world.

“We recently hosted a wedding in Hawaii where only the bride and groom were present in Maui with a local minister. We assigned the 200 guests to four virtual rooms, each with its usher to help them with any issues, and manage event flow,” says Kanika Subbiah, founder of virtual wedding planning platform Weddingwishlist.com.

With people eager to know every detail about the celebrities getting married, it becomes important to decide what content goes out. All of this is carefully vetted and posted from their personal social media handle.

The world is changing and so is what’s considered the bare minimum in a plush setting. As their clients adapt to change and yet try to live it up, the luxury wedding industry is ready to deliver.