

Mumbai Wedding

By Verne Maree



“Prepare to be overwhelmed by the noise, the colours, the dancing and the feasting,” my Indian expat friend Jyoti warned me, as I was about to leave on my first trip to Mumbai and my first wedding in her country. “And the hospitality shown to guests at a Sikh wedding is out of this world.”



When Roy's long-time shipping colleague, Satnam Singh, pressed us to attend the four-day wedding in Mumbai of his and Jaspal's only son Harjot, we thought: why not? It would probably be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Though Roy called Bombay (as Mumbai was then) his homeport for a number of his 10 years at sea, this would be my first visit.

As the wedding party was spending the week at the Trident Hotel Bandra Kurla, it made sense for us to follow suit. The Trident brand is the business arm of the more famous Oberoi hotel group, and we couldn't fault our hotel on anything, from the comfort of our Club Suite and the 24-hour Club Lounge to the superbly efficient, warm and friendly hotel staff. Wedding suits and saris were whisked away by housekeeping within two minutes of a phone call, and returned immaculately pressed. I've never seen anything like it at a Western hotel.

Getting Around

We had just three days to see some of the sights – and, most importantly, shop for wedding clothes – before the wedding began. If sightseeing had been our main goal, we'd have based ourselves in the city district of South Mumbai, either at that relic of colonial splendour, the Taj Mahal Palace hotel, at the Oberoi or at the Trident Nariman Point.

Though it's home to the US General Consulate and various five-star hotels, Bandra Kurla is not a pretty area. The same can be said of most of Mumbai, to be honest; and if we hadn't had a car and wonderful driver at our constant disposal (for the equivalent of a mere S\$60 a day), I'd have been more nervous of going out. The traffic is indescribable, and the sheer mass of humanity and frequent scenes of painful poverty can be overwhelming for the uninitiated. Except for parts of South Mumbai's touristy destinations, streets are lined with piles of decaying garbage; even the sea smells bad.

Nevertheless, we had an enjoyable time ticking off sights such as the Gateway to India, a grand example of Indo-Saracenic architecture; the Gothic Revival-style Victoria Terminus (now renamed the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, and a UNESCO World Heritage site); the Hanging Gardens, a bit parched and dusty in the pre-monsoon dryness; shopping for wedding jewellery in the packed Colaba Causeway market, with a beer at famous Leopold's Café; sunset at the Chowpatty and Juhu Beach, famous for street food such as my favourite *pani puri*: crispy-fried, hollow puri filled on the spot with a spicy, tangy liquid and devoured immediately. Outstanding!

Allowed one museum, as usual, I chose the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya. Mercifully acronymed the CST Museum; it may be easier (if less politically correct) to ask for it by its old name, the Prince of Wales Museum. What a gem! – not only for the way it tells the city's fascinating

story, including its Portuguese and British colonial history, but for the tranquil beauty of the museum's Indo-Saracenic architecture.

Another highlight was tea and Indian snacks – including *pani puri* – at the Taj Mahal Palace's Sea Lounge, just opposite the Gateway to India. To Roy's happiness, we were served by a venerable and very proper waiter who'd been working there since Roy and his British India Steam Navigation Company (BI) buddies used to pop in for tea during the early seventies.

Nothing to Wear

I admit that I agonised over my outfits for the four-day wedding. First, could I get away with Western gear? No, as it turned out; the strapless short dress I wore to the first event felt embarrassingly louche. (When a small child touched my knee, wonderingly, I got the message.)

How many ensembles would I need – and of what sort? "You'll be ripped off if you go to Little India alone," my kind

colleague, Uma, had said. "Let me help you." With her help, I was able to leave Singapore with two outfits – a tailor-made turquoise sari and a readymade floor-length gold Punjabi suit.

Those trips to Little India with Uma were a cultural experience in themselves. One of her favourite shops, Haniffa's in Buffalo Road, was where we found the perfect sari. I'd only plucked up the courage to wear this traditional garment – a six-metre length of intricately pleated and draped fabric – when she assured me that one could get the waist pleating "stitched" by a tailor. This wonderful and invisible cheat eliminates the clear and present danger of your sari falling off. After Uma's rapid-fire Tamil instructions to an elderly tailor on the upper level of Tekka Mall, much measuring and discussion and a couple of fittings, the work was completed within a week.

Amazingly, most of the off-the-peg "suits" (meaning an Indian-style tunic of any length worn over matching pants and with a churidar or shawl) fitted me

with little or no need for alteration – and that was true both in Singapore and in Mumbai. I only wish the same could be said for Zara.

With two outfits in the bag, I reckoned I'd need to somehow find another two in Mumbai. Jaspal sorted Roy out on the very first day, whisking him off to her favourite tailor: Mumbai Millionaire, self-styled as "a designer groom wear that comes with all the trapping of good fashion that you'll need". Don't bother bargaining, by the way; they're above all that.

On the recommendation of our driver, I went to the huge and glorious sari emporium Paaneri, in Dadar East, and found a formal blouse, long skirt and matching shawl in jewel-encrusted black fabric. So heavy! The fourth and final ensemble – voluminous pink silk pants with a raw silk tunic – was from a designer store at the massive Phoenix Market City in Bandra Kurla. This mall has everything from Marks & Spencer's to Levi's, plus great Indian labels like Global Desi, Satya Paul, Ethnicity and Fab India.



DAY #1

FRIDAY NIGHT: Masti, Dance and Music
 "Masti" means "fun" in Hindi. The general jollity took place at a banquet-catering venue, complete with band, hired dancers and an open bar.

DAY #2

SATURDAY MORNING: Tikka Ceremony
 and Guru ka langar
 More usually held a week or so before the wedding. Here, the groom's family and guests assembled at their gurudwara (temple) for something akin to a betrothal ceremony. The bride's family (but not the bride herself) arrive with gifts and the tikka material: rice, saffron, dried dates and coconut, which the bride's father and other relatives smear on the groom's forehead as a blessing. So yes, there is a connection with chicken tikka!

DAY #3

SUNDAY MORNING: Wedding, proceeded by the **Baraat** and followed by Guru ka langar.
 The **baraat** is the noisy, colourful and festive street procession of the groom's party to the gurudwara where the bridal party is waiting. Harjot had been up since 4am to undergo purification rituals, and a screen of beads had been hung in front of his face. Mounted on an ornately decorated horse and carrying

Speaking of food, Guru ka langar is the lavish vegetarian buffet provided in the gurudwara dining area. While langar means kitchen, it also encompasses the idea of "conscious cooking while meditating on the divine to inspire humility". The delicious food is vegetarian, so that everyone can eat equally.

a sword, at least he had an umbrella for shade. Not so the rest of us: in the fierce midday sun, on dirty pavements and in the crazy Mumbai traffic, dressed in all our finery, family and friends danced frenetically to the beat of the band and the rat-tat-tat of fireworks.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON: DholiA bride becomes part of her husband's family, and the dholi is traditionally the ceremony during which she leaves her parents' home after her wedding. In this case – her previous home being Delhi – it's a jolly party held in a small hotel with a lot of jubilant dancing and singing. And more food.

SUNDAY EVENING: Bride's Parents' Reception

More of the same, really, but this time at the Kohinoor Hotel. As we'd arrived too early again (only an hour later than the official starting time), Gurleen's lovely uncle and his cronies insisted we join them in his suite and plied us with whiskey – maybe the best part of the evening.

DAY #4

MONDAY EVENING: Wedding Reception
 Perhaps the most formal and dressy of all the events – and that's saying something! – this was hosted by the groom's parents at the Trident Hotel's Golconda Ballroom. Tuesday morning's hangover was well earned.

The Programme

For us uninitiated Westerners, the pack of filigreed invitation cards for the various events that make up a traditional Sikh wedding was more baffling than informative. Googling various Indian terms generally brought up accounts and images of Sikh weddings in Northern America or the UK – not in India, where the guests are presumed to know what to do!

It seemed that every meal throughout the four-day affair (bar breakfast at the hotel) needed to be catered for, to show proper Sikh hospitality towards the many guests who have travelled from afar. Traditionally, they'd have come from different villages; in this case, they'd flown in from Delhi (the bride Gurleen Kaur Anand's home town) and other Indian cities, from Singapore, London, Dubai and more.

As we discovered, the printed starting time for each event was meant only as an extremely rough guide. Despite our best efforts to assess the correctly late hour to arrive – painfully difficult for the perennially punctual Roy – we only got it right on the very last night.



Gurudwara Etiquette

Just two rules:

- Both men and women remove their shoes and cover their heads to go into the temple proper. A token system ensures you get your own shoes back. While a large hanky would do for the men, Satnam arranged for a "turban man" for this special occasion. It looked great!
- Women sit on the left, men on the right, and on the floor if possible. There's a bench at the back for the elderly, and for stiff, inflexible Westerners like us.