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A Billionaire Wedding in India Has Everyone Wondering: How Much Did It Cost?

The Ambani wedding has already featured performances by Rihanna and Justin Bieber, a glass palace and a cruise—and it isn't over yet. Industry experts guess how much it all cost.

By Ashley Wong Follow
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The pre-wedding festivities began in March in Jamnagar, Gujarat. PHOTO: JOSEPH RADHIK

The most extravagant wedding of the year isn't over yet. But it has already featured private performances by Rihanna and the Backstreet Boys, a four-day Mediterranean cruise, a glass palace and custom Versace gowns.

These are just a few of the eye-popping spectacles from the pre-wedding celebrations for Anant Ambani, the youngest son of one of Asia's richest billionaires, Reliance Industries chairman Mukesh Ambani, and Radhika Merchant, the daughter of Indian pharmaceutical company CEO Viren Merchant.

The wedding is set to take place this weekend at the Jio World Centre in Mumbai, a convention center complex owned by Reliance.

The pre-wedding festivities, which Vogue covered extensively, began in March in Jamnagar, Gujarat. The three-day celebration counted among its guests Mark Zuckerberg, Ivanka Trump and Bill Gates. That was followed by a four-day cruise for 1,200 guests with various stops along the Mediterranean in late May. Then, in early July, the couple held a lavish sangeet—an Indian tradition acting as a sort of welcome party. The actual nuptials will take place from July 12 to 14.

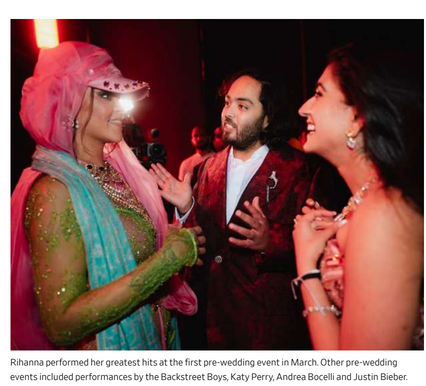
Radhika Merchant with the groom's parents, Mukesh Ambani and Nita Ambani, at the pre-wedding event. PHOTO: JOSEPH RADHIK

"When am I going to receive a wedding with this budget?" joked AJ Williams, a Boston-based event planner who has worked with celebrities like John Legend and Jon Bon Jovi.

That's the question on everyone's mind: How much did this all cost?

While the influence of the Ambani family in India and the cost of labor could affect the typical price, top celebrity and luxury event planners—used to dealing with seven-figure budgets—agreed that to pull off even a few of the pre-wedding stunts would be tens to hundreds of millions of dollars. The Ambanis did not respond to requests for comment.

Hiring Celebrity Performers



Rihanna performed her greatest hits at the first pre-wedding event in March. Other pre-wedding events included performances by the Backstreet Boys, Katy Perry, Andrea Bocelli and Justin Bieber. PHOTO: JOSEPH RADHIK

At the first pre-wedding weekend in March, Rihanna performed live for the first time since last year's Oscars with a medley of her greatest hits. In May, the Backstreet Boys, Katy Perry, Andrea Bocelli and Pitbull all performed during the cruise event, followed in July by a sangeet concert from Justin Bieber.

Rates for booking a single celebrity performer of this caliber could begin around $5 million, event planners said, but could easily soar to $10 million or higher. That's before factoring in additional costs such as transportation for the artist, lodging, production fees and security, likely tacking on hundreds of thousands of dollars more.

"Post-Covid, everyone's fees went through the roof," said Jamie Simon, director and head of events for Banana Split, the company behind influencer Sofia Richie Grainge's wedding last year, estimating Bieber's fee at about $10 million and Rihanna's at $6 million. He added that artists who perform at the Super Bowl—as Rihanna did in 2023—often have higher rates. Representatives for the artists who performed at the Ambani pre-wedding festivities did not respond to requests for comment.

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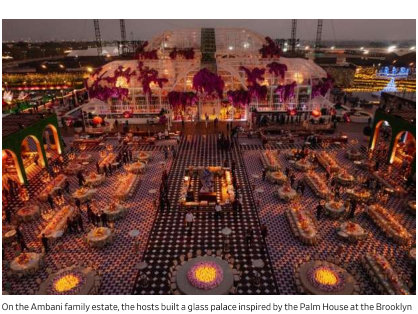
"There's always going to be a wide range based on how much the performer wants to do it, what part of the world it's in, where they are, and so on," said Marcy Blum, a New York-based event and wedding planner whose clients have included Kevin Bacon and LeBron James.

Building a Glass Palace From Scratch



On the Ambani family estate, the hosts built a glass palace inspired by the Palm House at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. PHOTO: JOSEPH RADHIK

The three-day March event began on the Ambani's family estate in Jamnagar, where the hosts built a glass palace inspired by the Palm House at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, with a mini-train that transported guests around.

The structure alone would easily begin at more than $1 million, said Sneh Diwan, founder of luxury event company Diwan by Design. Builders would have to factor in dozens of intricacies, Diwan said, such as installing central air conditioning, lighting, floors, electricity and potentially space for a kitchen or bars. Others estimated it closer to $4 million.

"That's definitely [at least] a three-week production," Williams said. "Sometimes we have to remove bushes and landscaping, or even tie back small trees, and then we have to put down proper flooring so trucks can go over the lawn properly and they don't ruin the lawn."

"You're building a little city," Blum said. "It doesn't just pop up, you know?"

Hosting a Four-Day Mediterranean Cruise

The couple hosted a four-day cruise for 1,200 guests that stopped in places such as Palermo, Portofino and Cannes. PHOTO: EPIC STORIES

The showstopper, according to event planners, was the four-day cruise the couple hosted for 1,200 guests in May. The cruise made multiple stops in places like Palermo, Portofino and Cannes. At each stop, guests were treated to on-land entertainment, with multiple late-night parties both on land and on the ship.

Organizing such a complicated event, experts said, would require hauling everything from food and liquor to flowers and Chiavari chairs aboard, not to mention the staff required to keep it going.

Event planners gaped at the idea of housing thousands of people for multiple days in a contained, moving space. Consider the dietary restrictions for 1,200 guests, not to mention the risks of bad weather or seasickness.

"I just have so many questions on that portion of it," said Michelle Norwood, a New Orleans-based event planner who organized actress Alexandra Daddario's wedding. "I mean, like, great experience. But human involvement, you can't control. That is where things always get a little hairy."

Bill Gates at the pre-wedding event with the groom, Anant Ambani, and his father, one of Asia's richest billionaires. PHOTO: JOSEPH RADHIK

"You could probably have 200 to 300 people working on this event," Simon of Banana Split said. "So you now need to move those people around, accommodate them, feed them, and all of the equipment and consumables that go with that."

Experts varied in their estimations for the cruise, but approximations began close to $10 million and went as high as $60 million.

"The amount of logistics that had to be involved in that is mind-blowing," Blum said, adding: "I'm thinking 50 grand a person, minimum, just for the [time on the] boat."

"My calculations, just like a good starting point, $38 million," Norwood said.

Building an Open-Air Market in an Italian Square

The final cruise day took place in Portofino, where the Ambanis built an open-air market in the city's main square, featuring shop-style stalls with items like hot chocolate and cheese toast.

Experts had a range of estimations, but guessed that the market could have set the family back anywhere from more than $2.5 million to $12 million, depending on the scale of the stalls, the decor and the number of people working. City permit fees would also probably get into the thousands, planners said—though, given the boost in local business that luxe events can generate, some cities may be open to negotiation.

"You've got to be very sensitive to bring everything together," Simon said. "You've got to compensate all the businesses there that probably had to not open for the public. Restaurants and boutiques and other things around there, who have other very wealthy clientele that wouldn't like to be told they can't have their pizza on a Thursday."

Staging a Massive Drone Show

Top celebrity and luxury event planners—used to dealing with seven-figure budgets—agreed that to pull off even a few of the pre-wedding stunts would be tens to hundreds of millions of dollars. JOSEPH RADHIK

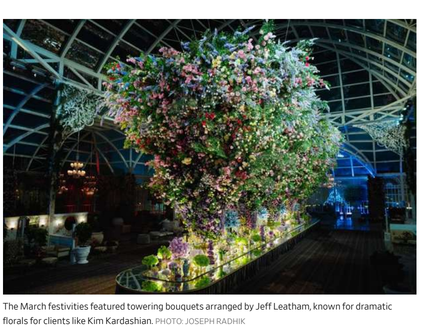
After dinner on the first night of the March celebration, 5,500 drones—according to Merchant's interview with Vogue—were launched into the Gujarat sky for a show.

Air traffic regulations and permits vary throughout the world, but in the U.S., experts said, to organize a drone show of such a scale would probably require at least half a million dollars.

"I recently just did a wedding with a drone, and just for three hours, the permit for that drone alone was almost $2,200," Diwan said. A show would also probably require synchronization with music and other lights or pyrotechnics, she said.

"A normal drone show, which is probably 500 drones, is probably $200,000 to $250,000," Simon said.

Making It Pretty



The March festivities featured towering bouquets arranged by Jeff Leatham, known for dramatic florals for clients like Kim Kardashian. PHOTO: JOSEPH RADHIK

To build out a wardrobe suitable for multiple weekends of luxurious celebrations, Merchant and Ambani enlisted fashion houses such as Versace and Indian designers like Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla. A custom Versace gown that Merchant wore during the cruise could begin around half a million dollars, experts said, but since Merchant told Vogue the gown took a year to make, it could also be as high as $2 million given the extended labor. Versace did not respond to requests for comment.

Flowers are always one of the most expensive elements of any event, planners said. The Ambani wedding festivities in March featured towering bouquets arranged by Jeff Leatham, known for dramatic florals for clients like Kim Kardashian. Leatham declined to comment on the floral expenses.

Keeping piles of dense, fresh flowers alive even for a short period in a hot environment is labor-intensive and costly. With multiple lavish floral arrangements for each day of each event, planners said estimates for flowers varied widely based on things like the ratio of fresh to artificial silk flowers, the number of staff involved and how the flowers are stored and disposed.

Diwan estimated at least a million dollars for flowers, likely closer to five. Some planners estimated the florals as closer to $20 million, accounting for labor, transportation and care. That could cover large structures like walls and even sculptures made from flowers.

One upside of all this spending, Simon said, is a boost to local businesses.

"We need these people to want to do these things to be big and to be bold and to entertain their friends, because the economic knock-on down the line is quite massive," Simon said. "Whatever the budget ends up being, that's money that's been spent with many, many small businesses across the world."

Write to Ashley Wong at ashley.wong@wsj.com

Appeared in the July 13, 2024, print edition as 'Lavish Indian Wedding Cost Is Sky High'.

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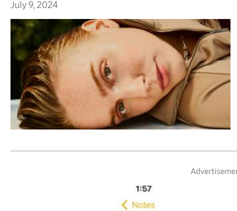

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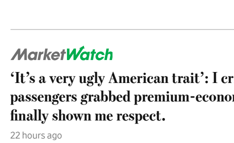

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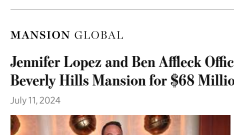

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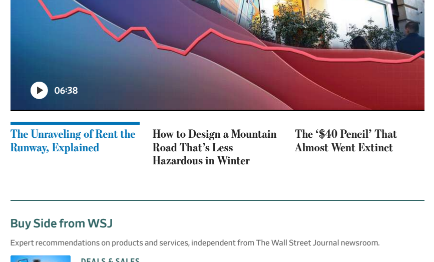

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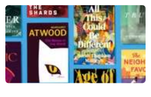

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