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**EVALUATING EGYPT AS A WEDDING TOURISM DESTINATION: APPLIED
ON SHARM EL-SHEIKH CITY**

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الملخص العربي:

تتطور سياحة الزفاف بسرعة مع اكتسابها شعبية بين الأزواج الشباب، لتصبح سوقًا واعدة مهمة ترغب الوجهات السياحية في استهدافها. وفي الوقت نفسه، تتمتع مصر بمجموعة واسعة من الموارد التي تجعلها وجهة مثالية لحفلات الزفاف. ومن ثم، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقييم إمكانات سياحة الزفاف في الوجهة المصرية، مع التطبيق على مدينة شرم الشيخ السياحية، بحيث تزيد مصر حصتها السوقية من سياحة الزفاف باستخدام المنهج النوعي مع منهج البحث الاستكشافي، حيث تم إجراء مقابلات متعمقة مع المديرين والمسؤولين في فنادق الأربع نجوم ذات خدمات الخمس نجوم والخمس نجوم في شرم الشيخ. وتتضمن نتائج الدراسة أن مدينة شرم الشيخ تتمتع بفرص كبيرة ونقاط قوة تجعلها وجهة رائدة لإقامة حفلات الزفاف، بالإضافة إلى بعض نقاط الضعف التي وضعت لها بعد مقترحات التحسين من قبل المسئولون الذين تمت المقابلة معهم بالإضافة الي مقترحات الدراسة. علاوة على ذلك، توصي الدراسة بأن زيادة الأنشطة الترويجية ستجعل بلا شك شرم الشيخ وجهة لحفلات الزفاف.

Abstract

Wedding tourism has been rapidly evolving and gaining popularity among young couples, becoming a significant emerging market that destinations wish to target. Meanwhile, Egypt is endowed with a wide range of resources that would make it an ideal wedding destination. Thus, this study aims to evaluate the potential of wedding tourism in the Egyptian destination, with the application on Sharm el-Sheikh city, so that Egypt would increase its market share of wedding tourism using the qualitative method with the exploratory research approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with managers and officials in four-star plus and five-star hotels in Sharm el-Sheikh. Study findings includes that Sharm el-Sheikh has great opportunities and points of strengths that would make it a leading wedding destination, and some weakness that

would be addressed. Further, the study recommends that increasing the promotional activities would undoubtedly make Sharm el-Sheikh a brand wedding destination.

Keywords: Wedding tourism, destination weddings, wedding planners, honeymoon, wedding ceremony.

1. Introduction

Wedding ceremonies are special events that newlyweds want to make unique and memorable. Traditionally, wedding ceremonies have been held in the newlyweds' hometown. However, it has become trendy for them to be held in other cities or countries along with the honeymoon. Thus, wedding tourism, also known as destination weddings has emerged, and has recently been gaining popularity among young couples (Mendes, 2024; Dovgun & Cherniakova, 2014). It is one of the fastest developing sectors in tourism industry, providing an opportunity for destinations to diversify the tourism products they offer (Kanca & Unur, 2021; Szczepanik & Wiesner, 2018). It has increased from \$21.31 billion in 2022 to \$28.31 billion in 2023, and is expected to reach \$78.89 billion in 2027. Besides, around 20% of weddings in 2021 were **destination weddings** (Condor Website, 2024).

Seeking a destination for a wedding, the couple seeks one that offers a fashionable and exotic experience, a romantic gateway, impressive experience, suitable infrastructure, and convenient legal marriage procedures (How-choong, 2018; Negm & Elsamadicy, 2017).

Egypt possesses unpaired beaches and numerous archaeological places (Negm & Elsamadicy, 2017). However, it is not adequately positioned as a wedding destination despite the noteworthy development of wedding tourism globally. Thus, this study aims to evaluate Egypt as a wedding destination, with the application on Sharm el-Sheikh city, to provide the decision makers in the Egyptian tourism sectors with insights that would support expanding the Egyptian market share of the wedding tourism.

2. Literature Review

Wedding tourism means traveling with the intention of getting married and spending the honeymoon or participating in a wedding ceremony in a place other than the original place of living (Wego Travel, 2023; Bertella, 2017). The increasing popularity of destination wedding has provided a great opportunity for every destination to brand itself as a special destination for a memorable once in a life-time celebration. However, to be an attractive destination for weddings, some features are necessary such as the climate, natural beauty, the culture, ease of accessibility, infrastructure, accommodation facilities, entertainment services, and facilitated legal requirements for foreigners getting married (George, 2024; Khodzhaeva, 2016). Beside, analyzing wedding tourism promotional materials demonstrates that weddings are positioned as sensual, natural, authentic, alluring, and dreamy, where marketers rely on destination scenery and landscape to create the perfect wedding imaginary (Rydzik et al., 2021).

According to Dovgun and Cherniakova (2014) and Suklabaidya (2008), wedding tourism could be classified into several types as follows

1. Urban: where wedding tours are made in different cities around the globe such as London, Paris and Rome.
2. Beach: where wedding tours are made in resorts in various destinations such as Egypt and the Canary Islands of the Bahamas.
3. Mountains: where wedding tours are made in destinations with mountains such as Switzerland and Austria.
4. Mixed travel: where wedding tours could combine enjoying the beach, nature and mountains, and exploring the city as well.
5. Exotic: where the couple prefer to get married in an unfamiliar ceremony, such as hot air balloon or underwater ceremony.

Wedding tourism has several characteristics, some of which are common among all tourism services:

1. Intangible: the service can not be examined or tested before purchase, which causes uncertainty. Seebaluck et al. (2015) suggest that using tangible resources including brochures and venue website would assure the couple and eliminate the uncertainty.
2. Inseparable: the service is provided simultaneously with the consumption, and the client has a direct contact with the service provider (Witt, 2006).

3. Unique: the same service differs from one provider to another. Besides, the experience of the same service varies from one client to the other (Zamri et al., 2014).
4. Perishable: the service can not be stored for future use. The venue, for instance, if not sold one day, is lost for good.
5. Ambiance: it plays a vital in a successful experience. It is created by the guests. Thus, a stunning venue and delicious food are not enough, and the needs and desires of the guests must be highly cared for to ensure the success of the wedding.
6. Labor intensity: it differs from one event to the other, depending on the requests of the couple, number of the guests, and the time needed for the preparation.
7. Fixed timescale: regular activities can continue for an unlimited time. On the contrary, timing is very important in wedding activities.
8. Rituality: rituals and traditions play an important role in weddings.
9. Sense of belonging: the interaction between friends and family that attend the wedding makes them feel a the sense of belonging (Witt, 2006).

The popularity of wedding tourism has been influenced by many drivers including the decrease in number of invitees willing to travel to attend the wedding, merging the ceremony and honeymoon in the same place, the desire to have an intimate and unique wedding while escaping some

family obligations and exploring different cultures (Del Chiappa, 2022; Pereira et al., 2022; Breg, 2013).

Wedding tourism has fundamental impacts that is highly beneficial to the destination whether socially, environmentally, or in terms of destination marketing and brand awareness (Del Chiappa & Fortezza, 2015; Del Chiappa & Fortezza, 2013). Further, it has a major contribution to the economy of the destination directly and indirectly. In addition to generating direct revenue from wedding expenditures, they also have a multiplier effect on the economy through the guests' expenditures on lodging, food and beverages, transportation, and other travel-related activities (Mendes, 2024). Moreover, wedding tourists have a higher purchasing power than other travelers as they want to enjoy a unique and unforgettable experience (Singh, 2020; Khodzhaeva, 2016). Besides, the average budget of a destination wedding increased from \$28,000 in 2019 to **\$35,000** in 2023 (Condor Website, 2024). Additionally, it provides an opportunity for expansion for wedding-related businesses, and increases job opportunities, among which are wedding planning jobs (Szczepanik & Wiesner, 2018; Rogerson & Wolfaardt, 2015). Wedding planners help facilitate and reduce the time needs for managing and organizing weddings (Demicoli, 2017). Their role becomes more significant in destination weddings as they not only play a vital role in promoting the destination for wedding, but also assist the couple through the extensive information they have about the destination, providing them with detailed information about the services' options and the legal requirements (Khodzhaeva, 2016; Chao, 2012).

Making a decision regarding selecting a destination for a wedding is influenced by several factors including the budget, number of guests, wedding theme, destination accessibility, climate, local culture, destination attractions, amenities, safety and security, venue availability, and the legal requirements for getting married in the destination (Mendes, 2024; Kaur et al., 2023; Negm, 2016). Other factors that affect the decision include facilitated Visa requirements to enter the destination (La Ragione, 2019), successful marketing campaigns, and travel agents (Lê, 2023; Amara, 2017; Moira et al., 2011).

Some of the famous destinations for wedding tourism include Italy, Hawaii, Mexico, Bali, India (Mendes, 2024; Wego Travel, 2023). Meanwhile, India is largest exporter of wedding tourism (SIS, 2023a). Comparing the population number to the annual weddings number, the following are significant wedding tourism markets to be targeted by wedding destinations as stated by Mendes (2024) in Table 1.

Table 1: Top wedding tourism markets

Country	Population (2022 estimates)	Weddings (annual estimates)
India	1.40 billion	10-12 million
United States	332 million	2.2 million
China	1.41 billion	10 million
Russia	146 million	1 million
Brazil	214 million	1 million
Japan	125 million	600,000
Germany	84 million	400,000
France	65 million	230,000
Italy	60 million	190,000
Spain	47 million	160,000
United Kingdom	68 million	240,000
Canada	38 million	150,000
Australia	26 million	120,000
South Korea	52 million	210,000
Mexico	130 million	500,000

Source: (Mendes, 2024).

Egypt is blessed with diversity of resources that would facilitate positioning itself as a wedding destination including natural and man-made attractions, rich cultural heritage, moderate climate, strategic location (SIS, 2023b). Besides, it attracts tourists from all over the world to enjoy its charming coasts and unique sightseeings, with tourism traffic

that accounts for around 15% of its economy and provides millions of job opportunities (USAID, 2023).

Sharm el-Sheikh, also known as the city of peace, is one of the most attractive cities for inbound tourism traffic in Egypt. It has become an important center for holding local and international conferences and events (Abu Bakr, 2024; SIS, 2022), and received 3 million tourists in 2023 as stated by the Minister of Tourism and Antiquities (Aleskandrany, 2023). Further, it was awarded the world's safest tourist destination title as stated by the Egyptian Prime Minister (The Egyptian Cabinet Website, 2024). Moreover, in 2005, the BBC classified the city as one of the four most beautiful cities in the world, and the UNESCO classified it as one of the top 5 cities of peace in the world (SIS, 2022). Sharm el-Sheikh possesses unique beaches, stunning landscape, diversified attractions, adequate infrastructure, several activities, amenities (SIS, 2022), and an international airport that is capable of receiving up to 10 million tourists annually as stated by the Egyptian Prime Minister (Ahram Online Website, 2022).

Furthermore, in 2023, Sharm el-Sheikh hosted a huge Indian destination wedding where 337 wedding guests arrived to the city's international airport to attend the ceremony. The couple then stayed for their honeymoon and the guests flew back home after the wedding (Hamdy, 2023). Additionally, in an attempt to promote Sharm el-Sheikh as a wedding destination, the International MICE and Wedding Forum (IMWF) was hosted in the city in 2023, with the cooperation of the Turkish travel agent Inventum Global who plans to attract Indian weddings to Sharm el-Sheikh for the upcoming five years (SIS, 2023a).

It is noteworthy that destinations weddings are not a new concept in Egypt, and several weddings have been held specially in Sharm el-Skeilh. However, the city would greatly benefit from the wedding tourism market by positioning itself as a wedding destinatin, especially with all the merits it posseses. In this regard, this study aims to evaluate Sharm el-Skeikh as a wedding tourism destination.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Data collection Methods and Procedures

In this study, the exploratory research approach is adopted, which is defined as an approach that explores research issues that have not previously been studied in depth (George, 2021). It is often used when the study's issue is new or there are some challenges in the data collection process. The exploratory research data collection can be made by various data collection methods; some examples include focus groups, surveys, or interviews.

Due to the lake of studies about the wedding tourism in the Egyptian destination, and to respond to the lack of information available on Sharm el-Sheikh as a wedding destination, this research used the qualitative research with the exploratory approach for evaluating this new tourism product in all aspects, which would help decision-makers and the public and private tourism sectors make the right decisions to develop and promote wedding tourism.

According to the International MICE and Wedding Forum (IMWF) which was launched in Sharm el-Sheikh from December 18-21, 2023 to

promote wedding tourism, there are future plans to market Sharm el-Sheikh a global wedding destination (Samir, 2023). Therefore, this study is applied on Sharm el-Sheikh city by using in-depth interviews, which were conducted with 25 participants (3 hotel managers, 5 sales managers , 5 events managing specialists, 9 front office agents, and 3 wedding planners) in four-star plus and five-star hotels via field visits, telephone calls and online meetings. The questions are divided into two parts. Part one revolved around gathering some information about wedding ceremonies in Sharm el-Sheikh (prices, packages' services provided, which markets most prefer Sharm el-Sheikh , which seasons are preferred).

While, part two aimed at for determining how wedding tourism can be developed in Sharm el-Sheikh by demonstrating what are the strengths, and weaknesses of Sharm el-Sheikh, the opportunities that Sharm el Sheikh has, and the threats it faces in terms of wedding tourism, in addition to exploring how to increase and promote wedding tourism in Sharm el-Sheikh.

3.2 Interview Analysis and Discussion

Part one: the current state of wedding tourism in Sharm el-Sheikh

In this part, participants responded to some questions about the wedding ceremonies in Sharm el-Sheikh hotels. The majority of them (76%) stated that regarding the kind of wedding ceremonies, couples prefer outdoor parties (beach, pool, garden) with romantic dinner and live music for example. Moreover, all participants mentioned that wedding packages include transportation services, accommodation services, wedding

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ceremonies and food and beverage services. Additionally, 36% added that they can provide special services upon request from the couples, such as; ethnic dishes, photo session, hair stylist and makeup artist, and wedding dresses and groom suits. Besides, the participants responded with various points that illustrated that the pricing of the wedding packages is determined according to several factors among which are:

- The services selected by the guests and the quality of those services.
- The venue of the event, number of guests, and the type and theme of the wedding ceremony.
- The selected food and beverage type, where the raw materials' prices added to the operational expenses and profit margin of at least 40%.
- Some of the respondents added, sometimes pricing is affected by other factors such as the country of origin of the couple, and also the commission rate agreed upon in advance with the travel agents and tourism companies.
- Others clarified that, occasionally it depended on the nationality of guests, type of the market (primary, secondary, potential) and the price range of competitors.

As for markets which most prefer Sharm el-Sheikh for holding wedding ceremonies, the answers were in the following order (descending order):

- 1- The domestic market (The Egyptians).
- 2- The Middle East countries.
- 3- India and the Far East countries.

4- Russia and Ukraine.

The main reason of this question was to gather information about the international market, however, it turned out that the domestic market is the biggest market in wedding tourism. Thus, more efforts must be exerted to attract the international markets' attention.

Almost 85% of the participants agreed that the most two preferred seasons for wedding tourism in Sharm el-Sheikh are the duration from March to May and from September to the end of November. As per the participants, those seasons are considered low seasons for other tourism types, which makes wedding tourism an ideal opportunity to exploit during these periods.

Additionally, they stated the couples prefer the weekend days more than weekdays for holding wedding ceremonies.

According to Kanca and Unur (2021), there are various distribution channels that offer wedding services' packages to the international markets such as tour operators, travel agencies and wedding organizations companies. This was confirmed by the participants' answers when asked about the distribution channels they use to promote their wedding services to the international markets, where they mentioned that travel agencies, wedding planners and tour operators have the most share, followed by marketing and sales team of the hotel.

Consequently, the responses to part one of the questions regarding the wedding tourism facilities and services agreed with various studies that talked about the wedding tourism as a new tourism product in other

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destinations in terms of wedding parties types, how the pricing is determined, the wedding ceremonies' provided services, in addition to the distribution channels that may help to offer the wedding tourism services to the international markets (Mashooq and Kumar, 2022; Kanca & Unur, 2021; Halpenny, 2016; Khodzhaeva, 2016; Del Chiappa & Fortezza, 2015).

Part one: how wedding tourism can be developed in Sharm el-Sheikh:

This part focused on the participants' thoughts about what can be done to increase and develop the wedding tourism in Sharm el-Sheikh. Before providing suggestions, they pointed out some strengths and weaknesses of Sharm el-Sheikh, in addition to the opportunities that it has and the threats that it faces in the context of wedding tourism. Using SWOT analysis, these points were collected and concluded in the following table:

SWOT analysis of Sharm el-Sheikh city in terms of Wedding Tourism

Strengths	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- High quality services and price diversity.- Climate, natural beauties, several tourist attractions, and sunny days all year.- Holiday and honeymoon opportunities for guests.- Lots of tourism businesses and their advanced infrastructure and superstructure.- Its unique location, international airport and essay access.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Couples looking for different experiences.- The emergence of new markets (such as Indians).- Increasing the demand for alternative tourism.- Increasing awareness of wedding tourism.- Increasing relations with the Middle East and Far East Countries.- The recent emergence of special events organizing companies.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Its image as a pioneer destination. - High safety and security. - Strong relationships with travel agencies. 	
Weaknesses	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of marketing and promotion. - Its image as a cheap destination. - Lack of cooperation with the official tourism authorities. - Increase of competitors. - Lack of awareness of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - - Political instability and conflicts in neighboring countries. - - Excessive traveling and wedding ceremonies procedures. - - Competition and variety of alternatives. - - High prices for some special services.

some the domestic tourists. - Reduction of direct flight.

Accordingly, the participants added some suggestions which were classified, concluded and listed as follows:

1- Suggestions for developing the wedding tourism:

- 1.1 Communicating with the official authorities to ease regulations, permissions and restrictions.
- 1.2 Supporting the investors for more investments in wedding tourism facilities and services.
- 1.3 Getting more information about the most successful competitors and recognizing what they offer to develop the wedding tourism experience in Sharm el-Sheikh.

2- Suggestions for promoting wedding tourism:

- 2.1 Promoting all available wedding tourism products with their diverse prices specifically in potential markets.
- 2.2 Providing more all-inclusive programs for couples.
- 2.3 Increasing the electronic advertising campaigns about wedding tourism to reach more target couples.

The responses to part two of the questions regarding the strengths, opportunities, and future promotional efforts to increase the wedding tourism in Sharm el-Sheikh city are consistent with what was mentioned

in several resources (Egypt Today Website, 2023; Hamdy, 2023; Samir, 2023; Trade Arabia Website, 2022).

This study is the first to evaluate the current state of wedding tourism in Sharm el-Sheikh, through identifying the main weaknesses it has and the threats that it face in addition to the strengths and opportunities of the city in context of wedding tourism; that is for :

- A- Modifying this situation in proportion to what the competitors offer.
- B- Rebuilding the current image of Sharm el-Sheikh through following a modern marketing strategy that position and brand it among the preferred choices of marrying couples for wedding tourism.
- C- Increasing the market share of Sharm el-Sheikh in wedding tourism.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Globally, wedding tourism is rapidly growing as a new niche type of tourism that has new opportunities with many positive impacts for the tourism destinations. Meanwhile, Egypt has all the merits, facilities, and features that would appeal to the newlyweds, and position the Egyptian destination as one of the preferred couples' choices for wedding tourism, where they can make their dream come true by making the wedding ceremony and the honeymoon in one special package, have happy times and remarkable memories with their beloveds.

Sharm el-Sheikh is selected in this study based on the current efforts of the Egyptian Tourism Authority (ETA) to promote it as a unique wedding destination for the international potential markets, thus it is becoming essential to evaluate the current state of this city in terms of this new trend for expanding its market share in wedding tourism.

Based on the primary data, the participants gave a field perception of Sharm el-Sheikh -in terms of the wedding tourism- about the challenges (weaknesses and threats) that should be addressed in the improvement plan, and the strengths and the opportunities that should be exploited in the promotion activities.

Subsequently, this study recommends the following suggestions that could be considered by the Egyptian official tourism authorities:

- Expanding the Egyptian destinations market share in wedding tourism by applying some steps such as; designing creative advertisements specialized for the Egyptian destination's wedding tourism services and properties, attending and participating the international wedding fairs and forums, customizing TV and social media shows, that interview the newlywed, for promoting wedding tourism and its potentials in Egypt, incentivizing couples to select Egypt for their wedding ceremonies through promotional offers, variation of services and their price options, providing professional employees and experts specially for this type, increasing the direct flights to the Egyptian tourism cities and ease the accessible procedures for couples and their guests.

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- Increasing the promotional activities of Sharm el-Sheikh's wedding tourism opportunities and facilities to the high potential markets. Using the online distribution channels may help effectively in these efforts and in making Sharm el-Sheikh a brand destination in wedding tourism on all search engines.

- Encouraging the establishment of wedding organization companies in Sharm el-Sheikh and facilitating cooperation agreements with its resorts and hotels to expand marketing and promotion of wedding tourism in international markets, in addition to providing professional teams to organize these special events.

- Enhancing the collaboration with the travel agencies to include the wedding tourism in their packages to Sharm el-Sheikh , and facilitating the required procedures for implementation.

- Cooperation with relevant authorities for raising the awareness of the host community about the importance of wedding tourism and the positive impacts it has on the host destination in all aspects economically, culturally, socially, and politically.

In addition to all the efforts to increase the wedding tourism traffic to Egypt, whether through promotional or development efforts,

sustainability must be taken into consideration to ensure conservation and sustainable exploitation of all the destination's resources.

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