**MEXICO’S WEDDING rituals and traditions**

 Mexico has been for long a preferred destination for romance and romance-related travel. With a number of picture perfect locations that make the perfect scenery for anyone’s wedding movie, the country’s exotic locales, accessibility, romantic atmosphere and favorable climate are only a few of the reasons why more and more couple’s are finding themselves marrying south of the border. What truly sets Mexico apart as a prime wedding location is the great attention to detail placed on weddings. This is primarily due to the importance of marriage in Mexican culture, which ensures that every wedding in Mexico is only of the highest quality.

With Mexico’s people being such passionate and for the most part of traditional religious fervor, celebration such as weddings in Mexico may differ to marriages in other cultures, and we thought it would be fun to share some of the most interesting to-dos’ that relate to a traditional Mexican wedding party and that traditionally as well, usually involves: close family and friends –not meaning few but many-, some sort of ethnic food, music and religious customs, in a row of festivities of great symbolism. In Mexico we celebrate with honor when people commit to Love.

I read once that “Watching a traditional Mexican *boda* is a bit like studying the history of the country over the past seven centuries. Rituals, customs & traditions combined from the Spanish, Aztec, Native American, & Anglo-American cultures are found throughout the wedding” and it really made sense to me. Possible having taken rituals for granted, I needed to take a break and recall some of my experiences on the number of wedding I’ve taken part.

The people of Mexico love to throw parties & weddings are one of the most important celebrations and a perfect occasion to host a fantastic event. While we hope to have a fiesta that our family and friends swill never forget, we try to be very respectful of tradition.

It all starts with the beloved couple, falling in love and “deciding” to marry. That’s just the very beginning…

**“LA PEDIDA” OR ‘Father’s Approval’**

In traditional Mexican families, the father is very much the head of the household. He has the final say in allowing a couple to date and at time of wedding proposal to officially “approve” their daughter to marry and be “given in marriage”. *“Pedir”* means to request/to demand. If it is an extended family, the grandfather also has input. The fiancée and his family go to the bride’s household to execute this formalism to ask for her hand in marriage as a sign of respect to them, and also so the two families can meet if they haven’t yet or to get to know each other more closely as they will be related shortly trough the union of their children.

“Rural Mexican families tend to follow traditional dating customs more closely than those in the larger cities” was cited. Exposure to other cultures such as the American for example has influenced the younger generation, giving a more relaxed view on dating practices, however the majority follow along the marriage traditions still.

Once granted the permission to marry the bride, the families are able to discuss as well the best dates for the weddings to take place.

**Who pays what**

Mexican weddings can be expensive and some affairs could be on easily a reunion of 300-400 people. Is typical that the father of the bride, will pay for wedding expenses incurred, this is for the more traditional weddings. In more rural wedding the padrinos, friends & family consistent of a big portion of the whole town will help with the expenses and bring in food, music, beverages in a way to support the new bride & groom and make sure everyone has the best time, you would think than in smaller towns, pretty much EVERYONE’S INVITED.

In urban center and more modern couples, those who have been on their own for some time would sometime receive the support of both sides, the families of bride & groom, and doesn’t necessarily mean that they would pay for all. More and more we are seeing the couple will pay for some portion of the wedding. On the higher end of the social structure the more the parents pay, the more humble the couple, the less their parents are left with this responsibility, and in many cases that has to do with new generations having more and better opportunities and resources.

**Madrinas y Padrinos**

In Mexico, the couple selects those who would be the “mentors” to the couple throughout the engagement and marriage. They are usually people who have played an important role in the lives of the bride and groom or their families, they usually sing as witnesses as well on their civil union. Sometimes in most traditional households or towns, the “Padrinos” help the bride and groom pay for parts of the weddings, sort of “sponsors” of one or another aspects of the wedding, they would also take part of the church services as guest of honor near the couple.

Those selected as “padrinos” or godfathers are given the nickname of “compadres” and for that involves the families or friends in the close system of “*compadrazgo”*, and gift-exchanging.

**Wedding Attire**

Latina brides have a wide variety of options for their *vestido de novia* or wedding dress. While some brides chose a traditional wedding. Also popular as Spanish heritage is the mantilla style veil instead of the regular veil.

Depending on the area of Mexico you’re from and the type of upbringing, the customs for your wedding could differ enormously from one another… for that the wedding gowns can also vary from a simple cotton attire to a very elaborate silk or velvet embroidered one.

For example there’s a tradition where the bride sews three ribbons—yellow, blue, & red—into her lingerie for good luck. The ribbons are meant to ensure the availability of food, money, & passion in the years to come and yes, this isn’t visible but it’s a part of the traditions and preparations, in more modern families, she would only wear a blue colored garter (as in something blue).

In Oaxaca State, wedding dresses are always very personal, with lace, embroidery. In the south of the state they can be made of velvet with flowers embroidered, and a curious sort of white colored open hat called *resplandor* that gives a frame to the face.

In the state of Chiapas for example, the Chiapanecan textile is known because of its symbolic meaning, and is related to the soul. This symbolism reveals itself in the designs, traditional costumes or the dreams of the locals. Typically the designs reflect the power of the nature and the creation, that is a way of expression of their perceptions and beliefs. For that, each ethnic group has got its own representing design, and therefore these textiles are believed to preserve the identity of their community. The most used fabrics are cotton and wool, and are elaborated in their cloth and a sort of belt loom. In this region the textiles are used principally for ceremonies, rituals and in the daily life. For example, a typical **wedding dress from Zinacantán,** an area in Chiapas,is that made of cotton strings and goose feathers. In the pre-hispanic period these feather symbolized wealth, power, fertility and beauty. Because Zinacantán is characterized by the production of flowers , the main designs of this community are flowers and animals.

In southeastern areas of Mexico such as in Yucatan, there’s a common dress used by locals that is fresh and beautiful, consisting of a long straight skirt and long straight blouse in light cotton fabric with embroidered square neck, which for wedding attire is white on white, the flowers embroidered are hand stitched and this type of dress is called a **Huipil** (pronounced “ee-pill”).

Besides the classical suit or tux, some grooms may choose to wear a *“guayabera’,* a light, short-sleeved shirt perfect for tropical temperature. The shirt style is about 200 years old. It is a very detailed shirt, which includes embroidered panels or pleats sewn close together vertically. The design covers both the front and back. There are many styles and designs, on e of the most luxurious ones and perfect for weddings would be the one design called “presidecial” (“presidential”). It is also the shirt of choice for Mexican beach weddings. A popular color is white, but other colors can be worn at less formal weddings.

**Processional**

Our cathedrals, churches and parishes, are evidence of the town’s culture and heritage, with ideal architecture and scenery for wedding ceremonies. The use of our town’s icons for weddings for a truly unique experience for the brides… The bride participates in a processional with her parents and family from their home to the cathedral, as does the groom towards the place of the ceremony, asi if for the whole town to see and the parents to feel proud of their marrying daughter or son.

**WEDDING CEREMONY – Catholic**

Mexican weddings are full of customs and rituals that are steeped in Mexican history and the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church. Many traditions still practiced in Mexican weddings date back as far as seven centuries. Weddings are almost always held in a Roman Catholic Church, are very spiritual and involve a full mass, where the couple is considered married for eternity. The “*Novia y el Novio”* (bride & groom) and their attendants stand or kneel at the Church’s alter.

Family and Godparents “padrinos and madrinas” play prominent roles in the ceremony. During the liturgy godparents may present them with gifts of a prayer book, rosary and kneeling pillow.

**SYMBOLS OF MARRIAGE IN MEXICO**

**El Lazo**

The “Lazo” is a sort of tied rope which can be made from something as simple as a ribbon, to something as ornate as a rosary – either beaded or jeweled, silver filigree, crystals, satin or wreath of orange blossoms, fertility symbols- to symbolically join the bride and groom . It is placed around the necks of the couple – in a figure 8- after they have exchanged their vows to represent their linked future together; the joining of two lives. It’s also called a “UNITY LACE”. Usually, family of the bride & groom, padrinos or best friends of the couple are the ones responsible for “lassoing” the Bride and Groom together. Tradition requires the couple to wear the lasso for the remainder of the service. The lasso is a traditional rope, either beaded or jeweled (or both, in some cases) that is placed around the couple as they say their vows. The rope is intended to symbolize the statement of union and togetherness that the couple is making. The lasso tends to be limited to religious ceremonies.

In some of the more spiritual ceremonies of the many that can be performed in Mexico, at some more traditional Maya Rituals even, a *lazo* is also used, only this is made with natural elements like flowers or sisal twine, of coursed the ritual varies from areas of Mexico and specific indigenous groups to perform it.

An “*ofrenda*” or offering is usually made from the bride to the Virgin of Guadalupe at the church when in a Catholic ceremony, and so she kneels and prays in thanks and leaves a flower bouquet at the virgin’s icon altar at the very end of the ceremony before the procession out of the church. In a Mayan ceremony some shamans allow the bride and groom to also make an offering of a bouquet of flor de mayo (frangipani) to the *ceiba* tree, the sacred tree of the Maya, which joins together the heavens and the netherworld.

**Las Arras**

In a tradition dating back to ancient Rome, it is customary for the groom to present the bride with coins during the ceremony. The ritual of the 13 gold coins originated in Spain, where the number represents Jesus & the twelve apostles. The gift of the coins contained most of times in an ornate box or gift tray, and that are blessed by the priest in Catholic ceremonies are meant to represent the groom’s commitment to support his wife throughout their life together & her acceptance symbolizes her promise to take care of him. The groom would pour the 13 blessed coins into his bride’s hand and then gives her a box in which to place them for safekeeping.

**…AND MORE PROCESSIONALS**

In the more conservative or colonial towns, once the religious ceremony is completed and the couple if officially married, together they begin a journey to the location where the wedding reception will take place, accompanied by live musicians (often mariachis or the municipal band), with all of their family and friends following behind them, and a large part of the town joining them during that processional in celebration.

This sort of “wedding parade” what would resemble a “Callejoneada”, in Mexican-Spanish tradition is where the bride and groom walk the streets most often accompanied with a “burro” a tequila or wine bottle carrying donkey alongside the wedding group, so it’s guaranteed that the group will have they drinks poured at all times during the walk to the site, at the same time the enjoy amazing festive music, dance and toast to the Mariachi or “estudiantina” music.

This is an amazing tradition where the whole town comes out of their homes to celebrate and have fun with the newlyweds before they get to the reception with their guests.

**THE WEDDING RECEPTION**

Mexico is definitely a party town, so pretty much any occasion is a good excuse to throw a party,but most important because of the importance of marriage in Latin culture, this is supposed to be THE PARTY. Traditionally, they will go on until the wee hours of the morning, sometimes even long enough to see the sun come up the next day! Music, food and beverages are very important elements of these celebrations.

**The traditions at the reception:**

**“Lanzar el Ramo**” means to “To throw the bouquet”. Halfway during the celebration, a brief pause is made and the MC calls all the single ladies (your girls and older ladies included) to the dance floor and gathers around the bride and dance. At some point after a bit of tease the girlfriends friends, she tosses the bouquet either blindfold or standing on her back so it’s unknown who the recipient of the flowers would be. It’s supposed that that who catches it is the following to get married.

**“Tirar la liga”.** In US the garters toss. While the bride wears the traditional blue gather during the Wedding, the groom makes an appearance at the dance floor as well surrounded by the man of the party and stand around on a circle while he removes his bride’s garter – while she’s sitting in the middle of the circle- then once in a heroic moment of furor for him and the friends, they grab him and play around with him, on the dance floor and dance in a way to fun music recalling the “luchadores” (from *lucha libre*, wrestlers) or something else like a more humoristic march, which you often hear during a funeral, is played while the groom may be lifted by all the man invited, which symbolizes the “end of its life”. At the point where fun has been ad and music stops and he’s supposed to throw it without looking to one of the friend gathered, then who gets it is supposed to be the one to marry next. At the end of this is typical that the lady who gets the bouquet and the man who gets the gather have to dance to one song together in front of the whole party, then the rest of the party comes back to the dance floor and the party continues.

The Mexican traditions have evolved with the passing of time, combining ancestral Mayan and Aztec rituals, Spanish customs, and modern wedding trends. The food, music, dresses, and even customs vary from family to family. But one thing is true: Mexicans believe on the solidity and importance of marriage. And as I once read, “these sentiments combined with beautiful traditions form unforgettable weddings”

Many Mexican celebrations from festivals to weddings typically include the display of fireworks.

**Music**

Music, in Mexican weddings, take part pretty much on every stage of the celebration. Solos, duets, trios, bands, there’s always some sort of music ensembles surrounding every event

The traditional music is definitely Mariachi, which is fantastic to enjoy because is versatile, it can be either upbeat to encourage dancing or more subdued as a passionate or romantic serenade. Mariachi s will often play the recessional after the ceremony, & in some weddings they will play at the end of the reception when it’s almost time either to leave or for the “trasnochados menu” to be served, alongside with a shot of tequila. The members of a mariachi band, in general, play guitars, violins & trumpets. The bands often dress as Mexican “Charro” which is a very formal wear. For weddings, they may dress in a gala charro suit on black and silver or white instead. When performing at weddings, mariachis add a festive air to the reception.

The Marimba is a traditional instrument with a very upbeat sound, used to give a unique flavor to local events as well, and this is a more traditional instrument. It’s also the State of Chiapas for example icon related to such, her unlike any other places the marimba s played at once by at least two people. This instrument that is so fine tuned can be as smooth or as festive playing, as talented the musicians are.

In Mexico, live musical groups here are very diverse, and although they do vary from region to region, they all are very well-suited to provide lively entertainment.

Other regional band style for example in San Luis Potosi or Queretaro State area is the “Huapango” which on indigenous Nahuatl language means “on the dance floor” their sounds are a fun country style to dance to and they are basically cords’ instruments in different shapes and styles of guitars mostly.

**The Dances**

Some more modest and traditional celebrations would have the “MONEY DANCE” where the guests take turns dancing up to the bride & groom & pinning or putting money on their clothes, which allows the couple to spend a few moments with each of their guests.

“La Vibora de la Mar”. Or the “sea snake”. The wedding guests sing this song and dance hand holding in a circle first then around the couple and then ducking under a bridge formed by the bride & groom standing in chairs in front of each other.

In Mexico, parties are always about dancing. People actually are surprised with some western parties where people rather like to talk instead of having a good dance! Ths is particularly true in Oaxaca state. Oaxaca is famous for its bands. Each village has at least one band and most villages have several.

**THE FOOD & BEVERAGES**

**Food**

In most traditional towns, the wedding menu may include: chicken or pork dishes, spicy rice, beans, & tortillas. In most common weddings a beef or chicken menu with a side or potato and salad is most likely. But menus can get as fancy as the budget allows, with the Mexican culinary creativity and ingredients wedding menus can become the center of many celebrations.

In weddings and social events in the Huasteca area, a large tamale called Zacahuilis is cooked overnight in a ground hole and then shared between 50 to 150 people. It is made of corn flour, butter, ground chiles and pork meat.

Some traditional Mexican wedding cakes are often rum-soaked fruitcakes filled with bits of pineapple, pecans, or coconut. The “*3 leches”* cake is typical of all Mexico, but in Oaxaca for example, they prefer a normal cake that is more “dry” considering it has to stand for many hours before being consumed, .when in some typical weddings, more than 500 guests is considered “normal”.

Also another cake not to be forgotten, is the local favorite Pastel de Almendra (almond cake), everybody’s grandmother says that she has the best recipe… There are also traditional almond sweets that are given out as favors at weddings, these can be made in all shapes and colors, and are very good!

Many dessert tables combine sweet and savory, like peanuts with chile, and sweet/tart tamarind-pulp candies.

**Drinks**

Mexico’s famous fresh fruit waters, are a delicacy and many time hd as a refreshment upon arrival to the reception venue: horchata, tamarindo, chilacayota, zapote negro, Jamaica, tuna, etc.

One thing that is curious of the customs of Oaxaca, is that in the villages, before you get started with the banquet, you may receive a large bowl of hot chocolate chocolate (always prepared with water- never with milk) and a large piece of bread called pan de yema.

Tequila, rum, Whisky, vodka & beer are usually had in weddings, in many cases most traditional parties in typical towns would have beer and their local spirits instead (Mezcal, Xcanbentun, Bacanora, Posh, etc).

**Posh,** for example, is a strong alcoholic spirit brewed from cane, made in the indigenous Tzotzil communities and it is used as a spiritual drink during religious celebrations. They brew it in different tastes and made in that way it is called ‘aguardiente’ as well. The Tzotzil people drink it to be able to enter their spiritual world. But nowadays it is consumed as a strong liqueur as well.

**THE ‘TORNA BODA’**

The ‘tornaboda’ is still celebrated in various neighborhoods. It refers to the ‘after party’. They keep on celebrating untilr very early hours, sometimes even long enough to see the sun come up the next day! For these celebrations, there must definitely be a “levanta muertos menu” at 3 or 4 in the morning (literally, “get-up the dead” menu), for those who want to keep on partying, and also for those who have partied too much and need sustenance. In Yucatán, it is traditional to serve our “cochinita pibil” (annatto-marinated pork) either in tacos or in “*tortas”*, together with cold beer at that hour of the morning.

Depending on the region you’re at, the menu and customs vary, for example if in Queretaro, thee “trasnochados menu” (an after hours menu) consists of gorditas made in the region of cheese or combined with pork meat, and they are delicious. In Mexico City for example “tacos de canasta”, which literally translates into “basket” tacos, these are more tellingly called tacos al vapor, since they are “steamed,” or tacos sudados, since their texture is consequently “sweaty.” Long hours in sweltering conditions allow the taco fillings to soak the tortillas, adding a glistening appeal. In other regions this menu would be the infamous “chilaquiles” which is a corn tortilla based dish. The tortillas are sliced up, sauteed in a red or green tomato & chilies sauce, dressed with cheese, onion, and sour cream a favorite is also the “Pozole” (traditional Mexican soup). These are great comfort food choices and an aid to ease the pain of a hangover the next day.