**Russian Wedding Traditions**

Once the vast expanse of the USSR, Russia is now a smaller country, but still very vibrant with culture, customs and some very region-specific traditions.  A Russian wedding may not vary just by location though, as the religious aspect may well also be different, with Russian Orthodox Christianity, as well as Judaism and Muslim faiths also being a part of Russian religious culture.  There are also a great many Russians who regard themselves as spiritual without being religious, for whom folk-lore traditions and superstitions might be extremely important – especially when it comes to those wedding rituals!

What’s important to note though is that even if a couple have a religious service, this has no legal standing.  Like couples in the Ukraine and Belgium, for their marriage to be legal, they must complete a civil ceremony first.

**Russian Proposals**

The bald truth about that hearts and flowers moment of romantic engagements in Russia is … that it really doesn’t happen like that.  Generally speaking, a man might ask his soul mate to marry him and she might say yes.  And that, my friends, is that.  No flowers (unless he’s really keen and a bit of a poppet) and definitely no rings or parties, instead a sincere heart-to-heart agreement to spend the rest of your lives together.

On an even less than romantic note, the length of a Russian engagement can be influenced by the pressures of paperwork!  Relevant paperwork and documentation has to be submitted to the appropriate Department of Registrations (known locally as ZAGS) and the marriage must take place between one to three months of the submission date – otherwise a whole new submission must be made!    Just to add to that no-nonsense approach to the whole process, the couple are then considered to be a bride and groom but are not necessarily referred to as an “engaged” couple by their family and friends, but often referred to as “they handed in the application”.  *So, if you hear this about a couple, you’ll know they’re headed for a romantic, life-changing event, even if it doesn’t actually sound like it!*

The couple will usually go out and buy their wedding rings together prior to the marriage.  In Russia there are three traditions attached to the rings:

♥  The couple should shop for these together.

♥  The groom pays.

♥  These rings are actually known as “engagement rings” although they won’t come into play until the marriage ceremony.

**Romantic Russian Weddings**

Although the more wealthy Russians may have a more western influenced wedding, the majority of Russian couples follow tradition, which involves a two day wedding.

Much like the engagement process, the traditional wedding tends to be no-frills where that walk up the aisle is concerned, with no best man, bridesmaids, flower girls or ring bearers.  However, the wedding dress, rings, wedding cars and the reception are a priority and many Russian couples spend as much time and money as they can afford in getting these details how they want them for the day.

The wedding cars are a particular source of pride for Russian couples and this is where they will try to pull out the stops to get something special.  Luxurious, big black cars are associated with the Soviet elite and many couples will try to hire one at the very least for the bride to travel to the venue in.  Any guest who has a car will be asked to bring it along both to give lifts to other guests and to join in the motorcade behind the brides car: it’s not just the more the merrier, the length of the motorcade is also a source of great pride to the couple.

On day 1, the groom and his family will go to call for the bride (hopefully in that big, black flashy car).  However, he has to leave plenty of spare time because he has plenty of challenges on the way.  In an urban twist of an older, rural tradition, instead of passing gates which allow him access to his bride, the groom has to get past cheeky guests who are usually waiting in the stairwells of the bride’s apartment block (the majority of urban Russians live in apartments).  In this variation of the Chinese door game, the groom has to pay bribes, answer quizzes or prove himself worthy before he reaches his bride’s front door to whisk her away for the first wedding ceremony, *brakosochetanie*, although they will travel in different cars to get there.

The legal wedding ceremony takes place at the Department of Registration, where the rings are exchanged and placed onto the right hand.  The couple’s witnesses (usually their respective best friends – those who would have been their maid of honor and best man if they were having these) then take center stage for the rest of the ceremony, as it’s custom for them to have prepared witty and clever speeches to honor the bride and groom and to entertain the guests.  The emphasis is on fun and both witnesses will have spent many hours alone and together, preparing their words and even preparing posters and little contests to use in this part of the ceremony.

After this, the wedding could proceed in various directions, depending on the course of events the couple have chosen.  Options would include:

♥  Everyone might proceed to a church for a religious solemnization of the wedding (or this might take place a few days later, with the reception and celebrations taking place after that)

♥  The  couple go on a city tour to pay their respects to those who died in the wars.  Like their Belarusian contemporaries, this is a sign of respect and many couples will lay their wedding flowers at graves or memorial sites.http://ir-na.amazon-adsystem.com/e/ir?t=worldwedditra-20&l=as2&o=1&a=0307886816

**Russian Wedding Receptions**

It might take a couple of hours for the couple to reach their reception, if they are taking a city tour and by the time they get there, the guests will all be assembled.  Traditionally, if there are fewer than 50 guests, the reception might take place in one of the family homes, but it there are more than 50, then the reception’s likely to be held in a restaurant or other venue.

As well as the emphasis being on the happy couple, there are two big areas of importance for a Russian wedding reception – plenty to drink and lots of fun!   Whilst some cultures don’t encourage drinking at weddings, the Russian emphasis is on drinking and dancing to celebrate, with the more drunken guests, the better the party kind of atmosphere!

♥   Toasting the bride and groom comes first, followed by lots of speeches.  The customary toast is with champagne, but as this starts, just a twist on the “sour” food of Lithuanian wedding parties, someone will interrupt to say that the wine is bitter.  Everyone will then start to shout out for the bride and groom to kiss, to sweeten the champagne … but to do so it’s custom for them to stand and kiss for as long as possible whilst the guests count off the seconds and cheer them on!   It’s common for the guests to keep this ruse going all through the wedding feast, so there’s lots of kissing between the couple!

♥   Everyone is snacking on starters throughout the toasts and at some point, a relative will circulate with a tray for the guests to drop their gift envelopes of money onto.

♥   The two witnesses will still be at the centre of events through out the speeches and starters and will be encouraging games with the couple, such as quizzes and challenges.

♥  Before the next round of eating and toasts, there’s a chance for some dancing, with the newlyweds traditionally taking the first dance.

♥   At some point, the bride might be kidnapped, usually by the groom’s friends and he will have to answer a challenge or pay bribes to get her back.  If his friends are particularly drunk or the party’s particularly lively, this might happen a few times throughout the party!

♥   There is always plenty more eating and drinking, as well as lots of dancing and many more games!

Although the Russians don’t have a whole “cutting the wedding cake” tradition, the end of the reception is marked with the bride and groom giving out cake to see their guests safely on their way.

Oh and of course, this was all just day 1!  Apart from the hangovers, day 2 usually brings a party at the newlyweds house (or the house of whichever parents they may be living with to start with).  To help the hangover situation, the party doesn’t start until early afternoon.  Again there’s plenty of food and drink, although guests aren’t readily supplied with the cutlery they need – instead, they have to “buy” it, which is another way of them donating extra gifts of cash to the couple!

After eating, the main customary game is for the guests to make a mess on the floor for the bride to clear up – but the mess is of the coins and notes variety and, good housewife that she is, the bride will be expected to clear the lot!