



Wedding Traditions in Ukraine

Reading

1 Why do you think people spend so much time and effort planning a traditional wedding? Tell the class.

2 With a partner, spend three minutes writing down as many Ukrainian wedding traditions as you can think of. Read the text to find out which of the traditions you noted are mentioned.

A wedding is a major event in Ukraine and wedding traditions around the country differ, depending on where the wedding is held. Generally, a wedding that takes place in the countryside, especially in the regions of western Ukraine, is an exciting event that is full of colour and symbolic rituals.

Engagement

Everything starts with the formal engagement, when the groom, together with two male village elders (“starosty”), visits the bride’s parents and asks them for her hand. The groom offers a ransom for his bride, usually some money or jewellery. The bride’s parents bring out a woman or man dressed as the bride and covered with a veil, so the groom can’t see her face. When the groom realises that it is not his love and asks for his true bride, the family demands a bigger ransom. Once the ransom is accepted, the bride’s family offers the bride to the groom. The groom never leaves empty-handed. If the bride’s parents see him to the door with a pumpkin, it means that his offer of marriage has not been accepted. If the bride accepts, he is given traditional embroidered towels.



The Starosty

The starosty have an important role in the wedding celebrations. They are usually two family members or friends; one from the bride’s and one from the groom’s side. Often, the godparents act as the starosty. They are the official witnesses to the marriage and they may be the MCs (masters of ceremonies) as well. When there were still arranged marriages taking place, the starosty were the official matchmakers. Now, their duties include leading the wedding procession, carrying the icons into the church and introducing relatives from different sides of the families to each other. At the end of the event, the starosty cut and give out a special bread called Korovai.



The Korovai

Some days before the wedding ceremony, the bride’s and groom’s families bake the Korovai, a special wedding bread. This looks like a cake. It can have between 1 and 5 tiers and it is decorated with beautiful and complex designs. The Korovai is made by happily married women whose luck and good fate will rub off on the married couple.

The Korovai is present throughout the whole wedding. It is close to the altar during the ceremony and then, at the reception, it is placed somewhere where everyone can see it. At the end of the party, the Korovai is cut and shared among the guests.

The Ceremony



On the day of the wedding, which is usually, on a Saturday or a Sunday, there is an official civil ceremony which is then followed by a church service. One of the many folk traditions surrounding the ceremony is that of stepping on a towel. An embroidered towel is spread on the floor and it is said that the first person, the bride or the groom, to step on the towel will be the head of the family.

After the ceremony, it is customary to take the couple around the area and take photos of them in pretty settings such as parks, riversides or monuments. After this, it’s time for them to go to the reception hall. There, they will be welcomed by their parents, who will offer them a tray that contains symbolic gifts that include bread, honey, wine and salt. People may also throw wheat, sweets and coins to the newlyweds to wish them health and wealth.

CHECK THESE WORDS!

symbolic, ritual, engagement, groom, elder, bride, ransom, veil, embroidered, godparent, official witness, arranged marriage, matchmaker, procession, icon, ceremony, rub off on sb, altar, civil ceremony, folk, customary, reception hall, wreath, kidnap, devotion

Wedding clothes



Ordinarily, the groom wears a western-style dark suit and the bride wears a white dress. Most couples add a traditional touch to their outfits. The bride's headpiece may be in the shape of a traditional wreath. Also, both the bride's and the groom's outfits may have matching traditional motifs embroidered on them. Another custom is for the couple to wear wedding crowns. Today, many couples like to dress in national costume for the church ceremony.

The wedding reception

After the ceremony, it is time to honour the new couple and have fun. Everyone dances the night away and takes part in traditional wedding activities. There are entertaining contests organised by the MC and everyone joins in the fun. One custom is for guests to try and kidnap the bride and demand a ransom for her return. Another part of the wedding ritual has the groom clean a pair of boots and put them on his mother-in-law's feet. This shows his devotion to the family of the bride. Unmarried girls look forward to catching the bride's wedding bouquet when she throws it.

The wedding celebrations are officially over when the bride is covered with the wedding shawl. This shows her new role as a wife.

3 Choose the correct answer A, B or C.

- 1 When the man asks the woman's parents for her hand in marriage,
A he goes to their house carrying a pumpkin.
B he has to give some gifts to the parents.
C he lets the starosty do all the talking.
- 2 The starosty are
A the people who take the young couple to the church.
B responsible for organising the whole wedding.
C usually closely connected to the bride's and groom's families.
- 3 The Korovai
A is taken to the wedding reception venue by the starosty.
B is made by women with a successful marriage.
C is shared out to single women only after the wedding.
- 4 What do we understand about Ukrainian weddings?
A They often take place at weekends.
B They are held outdoors.
C They are no longer traditional affairs.
- 5 At Ukrainian wedding receptions
A only the unmarried girls dance.
B guests play lots of different party games.
C the bride's mother gives her son-in-law new shoes.

Vocabulary

4 Use words from the *Check These Words* box in the correct form to complete the sentences.

- 1 It is customary for the man to pay a when he asks for a woman's hand in marriage.
- 2 Wedding are usually held on a Saturday or a Sunday.
- 3 After the wedding, everyone gathers at a for a big celebration.
- 4 In the past, the starosty acted as and tried to arrange marriages between young men and young women.
- 5 The couple's wedding clothes often have similar motifs on them.
- 6 The men chosen to be the starosty are two village, one from either side of the family.

Speaking & Writing

5 Imagine you have attended a wedding in Ukraine. Write an email to a friend describing the highlights of the wedding and the reception (about 120 words).

6 **THINK!** Do you think it is important that people follow age-old wedding traditions or do you think weddings should be a more modern affair? Tell the class.