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Wedding Customs in Greece

In the eyes of a foreigner, Greece appears as a country with picturesque landscapes and rich historical background. This country's uniqueness is not limited to these though: Greek culture, developed over centuries, still plays a distinctive role in many aspects of everyday life. Wedding ceremony is one of the major representative customs that clearly portrays both the uniqueness and the charm of Greek heritage.

Even though wedding customs have evolved over centuries, some of the basic traditions of the ceremony have remained till today. The prevailing religion of the country is Eastern Orthodox Christianity, so the majority of the weddings are taking place in an Orthodox Church. The alternative of conducting the ceremony in the Town Hall is also available nowadays.

It was till almost 1950s when the need of a matchmaker was essential for a couple and their families to meet each other. That is not the case any more though. Quite many opportunities for acquaintances are facilitated by the modern way of living, and primarily the fact that women are nowadays independent, compared to their social status half a century ago.

So, meeting people, dating, and if everything seems to work between the couple...here comes the wedding proposal! The engagement varies from place to place. Most often, the man proposes to his future wife by offering her a ring, as a gesture of his affection and commitment to her. Till the ceremony, the woman wears the ring to the fourth finger of her left hand; it is only after the wedding that she moves it to the fourth finger of her right hand.

It is about time for the couple to set a date for the wedding, and choose the person(s) who will be their best man ("koumparos"), and/or maid of honor ("koumpara"). Those are usually either the groom's godfather, or close friends of the couple. Their task is to assist the couple during the preparations of the wedding, and help with the choice of the bride's wedding dress and the groom's suit.

A few weeks prior to the ceremony, the couple must announce their wedding to the social section of at least three newspapers.

Three days before the ceremony, a reception takes place at the house where the couple will live after the wedding. During this wedding reception, every time the bride-to-be leads a dance, the people present pin money on her dress. That gesture signifies the will and support of the family to financially assist the couple at the first stages of their common life.

The marital bed, which is prepared during that night as well, is also of significant importance. Family and friends throw rose petals and money on the bed wishing the couple a “blossoming” and wealthy life. Also, quite often, a baby – usually a boy – is rolled on the marital bed, as a symbol of fertility.



Fig. 1: The marital bed

On the day of the wedding, the groom and guests wait patiently for the bride to arrive to the church. The groom holds a bouquet of flowers that will offer to his wife-to-be. The father of the bride escorts his daughter to the groom: he “delivers” her to the groom, and gives the couple his blessing. Then, the couple walks inside the church to wed.

The ceremony begins with prayers from the priest, followed by him blessing the couple: he holds the wedding rings and makes the sign of the cross over the bride’s and groom’s heads. He then, places the rings at the fingers of the couple. It is the “koumparos” turn now to swap the rings thrice between the bride’s and the groom’s fingers.

The prayers of the priest continue. He wishes for the couple to love and honor each other, and as a symbol of “the glory and honor” bestowed to them by God, he blesses the crowns, called “stefana”. These are usually made of real or artificial flowers, tied together with a white ribbon, symbolizing the couple’s union.



Fig. 2: The “stefana” of the couple

The priest places the “stefana” on the heads of the bride and groom, and the “koumparos” swaps them three times between the couple’s heads. Then, the priest offers the couple a cup of wine, from which they both drink three times. The wine symbolizes the first miracle of Jesus at Cana of Galilee.

With the priest holding the Bible and leading the way, the bride and groom take their first steps as a married couple by walking three times around the altar, followed by the “koumparos”, who holds the “stefana”. The guests at this point, throw rice and rose petals at the couple, to wish them a long-lasting and stable life together.



Fig. 3: The couple takes their first steps as husband and wife

The end of the ceremony includes the priest's blessing towards the couple, to lead a life full of love, trust, consideration, and patience. He then removes the "stefana" from their heads, reminding them that "whoever is united by God, no human can separate". The couple exits the church, after giving a gift to the "koumparos", as a way to express their gratitude. The unmarried girls gather, and the bride, having her back turned at them, throws her bouquet: whoever catches it, is supposed to be the next one who gets married. The guests are offered sugar-coated almonds ("koufeta") by single girls, as a symbol of the stable relationship of the newly weds.



Fig. 4: The gift-wrapped "koufeta" offered to the guests

A reception usually follows the end of the ceremony, where the couple celebrates its union, and receives the wishes of the entire family and friends.