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Get Ready to Call 'Gorko!' – It's Wedding Season

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A stylish couple embodying the “Great Gatsby” themed wedding trend.

It's wedding season in Russia, and despite the fact that the country's annual divorce rate hovers around 50 percent, the number of Russians taking the plunge continues to rise. In 2014, 100,483 marriages were registered in Moscow — 3,900 more than in 2013, news agency RIA Novosti reported.

Russian weddings have a reputation for being big, raucous events. They typically involve a party with lots of food and drink hosted by the bride and groom for their family and friends in a restaurant or hotel. But this may be changing. Many couples are opting for a smaller but more unique event, says one local wedding planner.

"Over the last three years, the number of people who celebrate their weddings in pretentious restaurants with more than 100 guests has declined — it's the minority of our clients now," said Natalya Kudenko, art director at the wedding planning firm Special Wedding. "Today

Muscovites more often invite fewer people and choose less but better quality food, wine instead of vodka," she said.

According to Kudenko, people in Moscow have adjusted their preferences because they have a higher level of education, more disposable income and also travel a lot, which has led them to adopt a minimalistic "Western approach."

Her team organizes three weddings a month on average, each with a budget of around 3 million rubles ($55,800). Her clients, whom she defines as middle class Muscovites, often choose open air locations near ponds or lakes in the summer, and big lofts in the city center during the fall.

Some couples choose to organize their wedding around a theme. Grigory Misov, 23, is a physicist and his fiancee Daria, 22, is a bioengineer. Their wedding theme is "physics and lyrics."

"Around the table in the restaurant, in addition to the beautiful flowers, will be models of the solar system and a clock with its mechanism visible," Misov said. "Waiters will be dressed like lab assistants and serve alcohol from test tubes." Misov said that he and his fiancee chose a scientific theme for their wedding because it reflects exactly what their lives are about.

Other engaged couples choose themes from pop culture. After the 2013 film "The Great Gatsby," weddings with a 1920s theme became popular in Moscow.

For these kinds of parties, women wear dazzling drop waist shift dresses with a glitzy headband or bridal cap while gentlemen choose tuxedos with a classic peak lapel or a Victorian-era shawl lapel.

The 2008 Russian cult film "Stilyagi," whose title is a slang Russian term for hipster, helped launch a series of retro-themed weddings, and this trend remains popular.

Irina Getmanova, the owner of vintage shop Frik Frak, which helps couples find appropriate retro wedding attire, said that a wedding set in the 1950s or 1960s can be a good choice for parties where there will be a wide range of ages.

"The retro-themed wedding helps to avoid a generation gap, since young people don't normally have much in common with the older generation of relatives," Getmanova said. Her shop sources authentic 1950s wedding dresses, which run about 4,000 rubles ($75), from vintage stores in Europe or from older Muscovites.

Although a Moscow beach wedding may seem incongruous, the beach at Serebryany Bor in the Western part of the capital is one of the few places where couples can get married outside. Russian legislation requires that weddings take place in a branch of the State Registry Office, known as ZAGS, from its Russian acronym. At Serebryany Bor, however, there is a small building by the Moscow River where a ZAGS official can officiate a marriage.

Other couples choose to celebrate their roots with a wedding that incorporates old Russian traditions. Newlyweds Zhenya and Vladimir marked their wedding with Russian national folk songs and games. They got married on the most popular date for folk weddings — June 23, the day the pre-Christian festival of Kupala is celebrated. A Kupala celebration is full of pagan

rites that signify the role of water in fertility and purification.

For a Kupala wedding, the bride and groom dress up very simply in white cotton gowns and dance in a circle with their guests or jump over the flames of a bonfire holding hands, as a symbol of their unbreakable union. People swim in a river or lake and the bride lets the wreath of flowers worn on her head float away down the river as a symbol of her becoming a woman.

Russian Wedding Traditions

Many Russians still celebrate their weddings with ceremonies that fulfill the stereotypes shown in the 2013 hit film "Gorko!" In the film, the main characters Natasha and Roma celebrate their marriage with wild dancing, lots of drinking, disagreements between their families and fistfights.

The name of the film, "Gorko!" which can be translated as "bitter," is the phrase wedding guests yell when they want the newlyweds to kiss. The idea is that the sweet kiss will dispel the bitterness — and the longer the kiss, the longer the marriage will last.

The cries of *gorko*! are only the last of a series of traditions that must be carried out at a typical Russian wedding.

First, the groom has to pick up the bride from her home, a process that involves overcoming a series of obstacles such as competitions or riddles concocted by the bride's friends and family. This tradition is call the "buyout" because historically it was at this point that the groom had to pay the matchmaker.

Then, having picked up the bride, the wedding party travels to the ZAGS, where the bride and groom sign the marriage certificate and exchange rings.

The wedding party then drives around the city visiting famous sites, laying flowers and taking photographs. In Moscow, the most popular sites for wedding parties are Red Square and Park Pobedy.

Finally, the wedding party arrives at the reception, usually a restaurant, where they are joined by more guests and are entertained by a *tamada*, a toastmaster or master of ceremonies whose job is to keep the party going all night long.

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