



Information about the Environment and for travellers in Crete:

The traditionally Cretan wedding

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A wedding is everywhere a reason for celebrating, but on Crete, where tradition is still capitalized, a wedding is truly a completely special experience, both for the guests, and for the bridal couple.

Who believes that the preparations for a marriage start only weeks or months before the wedding day deceive oneself: already briefly after the birth of a girl mother and grandmothers begin with the production of the so called “Prika”, the endowment of the future bride! Here it is a matter of artful crocheted or embroidered bedlinen, tablecloths, etc. It all adds up in the course of the years!

If a couple decides to marry, the young man naturally has to ask for the hand of his beloved. This happens in the parents' house of the bride. If their parents agree, a “Logos” is given, that means, the pair “promises to marry”. The “Logos” should not be confounded with the engagement. The engagement is accomplished traditionally directly before the marriage ceremony by the Pope. Nowadays however many pairs decide to celebrate an engagement already months before the wedding together with friends and relations. Although this is unacknowledged by the church, such an engagement nevertheless has stronger and more binding character than the Logos, and most engaged pairs got permission by the parents to live together before the wedding. A concession to the modern age!

A kind of “open house” takes place in the dwelling of the pair some days in advance of the marriage ceremony. Some preparations are needed here: It is baked and cooked to a fare-thee-well (actually the visitors will be feasted!) and the brides endowment will be displayed so that everyone can admire it. The most important part of this custom is to put the linen on the marriage bed. That is the task of the unmarried young women from relationship and circle of friends. Particularly this tradition is a giant fun for the bride groom! If he finds that the bed looks not absolutely perfect, he removes the sheets again and the girls must start over. After two to three repetitions however usually also the most fastidious man is content! Hereafter is the time for the visitors to examine the bed and put gratuities down on it.

Once, the bridegroom trot off with his cronies the night before the wedding to pay a visit to his future parents-in-law. His companions took everything along from the parents' house, which the couple, according to their opinion, would need for their new home! This custom is still in place in some areas of Crete today, however with the difference that the booty is returned to the bride's parents.

Finally wedding day! The pair spent the night in the respective parents' house. Gradually now the closest friends wobble in, in order to help them with dressing. A strictly separation according to sexes is performed here: The women are helpful to the bride, the men the bridegroom. Particularly in the villages even today still many men decide to marry in traditional Cretan garb. The bridegroom is carefully shaved by his friends, the bride is artful combed and made up. At the end of the procedure the unmarried girls write their names on the sole of the bridal shoe. If a name at the end of the wedding celebration is disappeared, the young lady will soon marry!

It is now time for the bridegroom, together with the “*Koumparos*”, the groomsman, to drive to the church. To be “*Koumparos*” is a big honour, because he is considered to be the guardian of the marriage, therefore he has to, for example, take over the role of mediator with disputes of the pair and to normalize the relation. In addition, the groomsman has financial obligations: He takes over the costs of the church, can-

dles, the “*Stefana*”, thus the “wedding garlands” of the pair and often also for the flower decoration of church and bride car

In addition he helps with planning and organization of the wedding and usually makes the pair a very expensive gift, for example furniture or electrical appliances for their new home. But he also is richly presented by the bridal couple, thus he gets for example a valuable clock, a new television or the like.

Also the guests now meet in front of the church, in order to wait strained for the arrival of the bride. Usually that is a considerable crowding, because on Crete a wedding is not a family celebration but more a kind of a village festival, to which everyone known is invited. Thousands or more guests are here no rarity! Finally the moment everybody was waiting for. The bride turns up (see fig. below left) and everyone tries to snatch a view of her. Her father “hands her over” to his future son-in-law. Often rifle salvos are fired by the men as indications of joy. Bridal couple, Pope and groomsman blaze the trail to the altar.



The orthodox wedding consists of two parts, the engagement and the marriage ceremony. First of all the rings are blessed and given to the pair. They are now engaged and join the hands as indication of this connection. The most important “accessory” for the marriage ceremony are the “*Stefana*”, head garlands, which are connected by a silk ribbon. With these the Pope makes the sign of the cross in front of the forehead of bride and bridegroom, in order to then pass them on to the groomsman. They are then put on to the pair and exchanged three times from head to head. The Pope reads excerpts from the gospel, where it matters about the holiness of the marriage, love and the respect. Suddenly all guests seem to stare mesmerised at the feet of the couple! That has a good reason: The Pope reads an excerpt which says “the woman shall fear and honour her man” (loosely translates). If the bride manages to step softly on the foot of her man in the nick of time she will wear the trousers in the marriage. Naturally the bridegroom wants to avoid that by all available means and therefore it comes to all kinds of funny contortions.

However this game is not seen at every wedding since sometimes it is felt abusive for bridegroom and church. Next a cup red wine is handed, from which the bride and bridegroom take a sip. In addition they are fed by the Pope with walnuts and honey (see fig. above right). Now it is time for the first steps as a married couple! Pope, married couple (still connected by the *Stefana*) and groomsman move three times in the circle around the altar meanwhile they are pelted with rice by all the persons present. The circle symbolizes the everlastingness of the marriage; the number 3 names the holy trinity. The rice shall cater for fecundity and that the marriage strikes strong roots.

Only now the “*Stefana*” are doff and the hands of the couple are released with assistance of the Bible. They are now one and only God can separate them!

Afterwards, the newlyweds place themselves with their families in front of the church to receive congratulations. “Live long! We wish you good descendants!” The bride gets jewellery put on by her parents-in-law and other close relatives of her man. Another family member stands near with a tray, where the guests put small envelopes with gratuities. These gifts are often seen as investment or loan by the Cretans. If one shows up particularly generous at a wedding, one may reckon with the same generosity at the own wedding or with that of the children.

Each guest receives a small bag with “Koufeta”, candied almonds (see fig.). The hard almond symbolizes the firmness of the marriage, the sugar the sweet common life of the married people, the ovate shape of the “Koufeta” stands for fertility and its white colour for the purity of the love. The number of “Koufeta” can vary, however it is always a prime number. This symbolizes the “indivisibility” of the married couple.



As much excitement makes hungry! The guests meet in the tavern or the festival room, in which the celebration takes place. The traditional “Gamokouloura” lay already on the tables, sweet wedding bread for the first hunger. Gradually different hors-d'oeuvres are served, for example filled wine sheets, spinach or cheese bags. The second course is the “Gamopilafo” which must not missed at a Cretan wedding. It is a rice dish, which is prepared in the stock of cooked goat meat. Further courses with lamb, potatoes and salad follow.

While the guests feast to their hearts content, bride and groom have the opportunity to make the wedding pictures or rest somewhat. Originally the bride used this break also to change for the celebration. Nowadays however she appears usually also to the celebration in the bride dress.

The pair arrives as the latter in the festival room and the bride has the privilege to open the dance with thunderous applause. After bride, groom and their families, also the remaining guests are asked to the dance floor. It is danced to the sounds of the lyra, sung and laughed till dawn.

If you receive an invitation to a Cretan wedding, don't revisit to long: accept it! The ceremony is beautiful and when Cretans celebrate nobody can lead on! In this sense: Have fun and addressed to the unmarried ones: “Kai sta dika sas!” Here's to your wedding!

Hereafter some commentated photos of a Cretan wedding, to which members of the board of the NLUK were invited:



Picture left: After the “dressing ceremony“ friends of the bridegroom, his groomsman (right next to the bridegroom) place to the common photo; the father of the bridegroom stands outside right.

Picture right: 3 brothers and sisters; Bridegroom, his sister Marinella and the trusting Pope, his step-brother.



Picture left: the grooms grandma (Sophia) and the uncle (Sophia's brother) Christof. Picture right: "full meeting" of the guest in front of the church



Picture left: the groom's parents with the couple. Picture right: the couple, his parents and the groomsman at the beginning of the wedding.



Picture left: the couple dancing the wedding dance. Picture right: Even the smallest wedding guests practiced in the dance