

Love on the run



Long-distance relationships can be hazardous and complicated arrangements — especially if the two partners live in different countries. In her regular Expatica column, Cultural Clues, Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich answers a question from a reader about how to end love on the run and to make things a little more permanent.

Sharon wrote,

I have been commuting between the UK and Germany to be with the man I love. We are even considering to make things more permanent. Any information you can share on how knots are tied will be appreciated.

Dear Sharon,

Oh, trembling heart! Love is a wonderful thing.

Let me share an interesting custom with you from the north of Germany: should your beau not be married by his 30th birthday, you can expect his mates to invite him to "a special party" in his honour.

While the friends get to enjoy a drink or two (or three), your loved one gets to clean the stairs leading up to the registrar's office. The meaning is clear enough: if you have not found a wife yet, then you'd better get used to clearing up your own mess!

Not to fret, German men have been domesticated ... and teaming up as partners whilst overcoming challenges is part of another ritual present at many a wedding ceremony.

Ever heard of a Polterabend? Not to be confused with Poltergeist the film. But the verb "Poltern" means to *make noise*.

This celebration is usually on the eve of the wedding. Often it will be hosted in a tent, and guests are served potato salad, sausages, goulash soup and lots of beer.

The guests (colleagues, neighbours, fellow members of sport clubs) bring chipped china and break it at the feet of the couple. This needs to be cleared away as a team but the handling of the pieces brings luck, of course.

The next day will be the official part at registrar's office with a small, intimate group of family members only, followed by a lunch and/or dinner.

Church weddings are still very much the norm, and this is usually followed by a big celebration such as a formal dinner with pictures taken in full attire. Then comes the fun part with music, dancing and entertainment.

Your friends usually will have cooked up some surprises: harmless ones such as re-enacting hilarious scenes of your bachelor days.

Sometimes they will miraculously find access to your bedroom in order to re-arrange the furniture. (You may find that the bed is gone or the room jam packed with balloons).

Still a custom in the countryside is for friends to kidnap the bride with the groom having to search for her and pay a ransom; you can guess what will do for "currency".

As you can tell, you'll need lots of energy. Some couples may want to invite up to 200 people and it is not uncommon for the celebration to be spread over several months. This means doing the registrar's office, then saving and scratching the money together so as to have the big church wedding and celebration months later.

You should give yourself time to get your paperwork in order and to have all the documents translated as well as verified by the consulate.

So find your birth certificates, arrange your Ehefaehigkeit document (a statement that you are not already married to someone else) and then make an appointment at the "Standesamt" to set the date.

You also get to decide on the family names, for you, your spouse and any future children. German law is very liberal in this regard and your husband to be can choose to take your name.

Needless to say, government moves to bring gay relationships into line with heterosexual relationships means that gay 'marriages' are not an issue.

Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich is managing partner of CONSULTus. Her website is www.Consultus.net. She reserves the right to decide which questions she considers relevant for her column. She will, however, not answer any questions dealing with tax or legal matters.