



From pop-up ceremonies to virtual Pinterest planners, Jo Usmar reports on the creative ways millennials are saying 'I do'

Last year, my now-husband and I eloped. We packed a suitcase, kissed our cat goodbye and the two of us flew to Italy with little more than an 'Arrivederci, folks, don't buy a hat.' We wanted the emotional and financial security that comes from being married, but we simply couldn't face the expectation, fuss and eye-watering costs involved with a traditional big day.

There is growing discontent with the big frothy white weddings of our parents' era. Only 5 per cent of men and 10 per cent of women aged 25 were registered as married in 2014, compared to 60 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women 44 years before. With the average age of newly-weds now 37 for men and 34 for women, people *are* still getting hitched, but on their own terms.

'With the growth of social media, the level of conformity has dropped,' explains psychologist Alla Davies. 'Women feel more free to make the choices they want without the constraints of conservative traditions, and they're not being judged for it.'

Kat Williams, founder of Rocknrollbride.com, adds: 'Nobody wants a wedding-by-numbers any more. I've

featured pop-up "flash weddings", where the couple text a time and location to guests on the day, and newlyweds who just rocked up to a field and had a friend officiate.' Elsewhere, there's a growing trend for virtual wedding planning, with couples taking a digital tour of venues and booking without visiting first.

For cash-poor and time-poorer millennials, there's little appeal in a wedding that takes 250 hours to plan and costs £20,000 to £30,000. This could explain the rise of the high-street wedding dress, with brands such a Whistles and ASOS offering stylish, more affordable versions to bridal boutique meringues. *Marie Claire*'s fashion features director Jess Wood (pictured far left with her father on her wedding day) says, 'Splurging your entire budget on an identikit big white dress doesn't feel very modern. And when you can buy a chic slip gown by Needle & Thread for £130 on Net-A-Porter or a cream jacquard dress by Self-Portrait for £102 on The Outnet – both of which you'll wear again – why spend thousands? I got married in a blush-pink tulle, knee-length dress by Kate Halfpenny [who specialises in bespoke vintage-inspired pieces]. I'd wear it every day if I could.'

It was a determination to do something unique that inspired Jenny Wilcox and her husband, Andy, to have their dream wedding by the sea in Devon. 'We'd been to so many weddings that felt samey. We wanted something personal and relaxed, so we invited everyone to go camping (having had a private registry office ceremony the week before) and asked guests to bring something to stick on the beachfront

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BBQ. The whole thing cost £3,000 and it was very "us".

The DIY crafting trend has a lot to answer for, too, with Pinterest and Instagram setting the aesthetic of the modern wedding (70 per cent of Pinterest users have wedding boards before they're even engaged). 'I had pine-cone place settings, tree-trunk cake stands, eBay bargain baubles, dried-flower bouquets and mulled-wine mix for my wedding favours,' says stylist Sarah Attrill of her December wedding in 2015. 'I know the effort we went to made it more personal for our guests.'

But while economics and social media have played a part, does this signal a deeper societal shift? 'There's no question that feminism plays a role in women doing things their way,' says Susan Pease Gadoua, therapist and co-author of *The New 'I Do': Reshaping Marriage for Skeptics, Realists and Rebels*. 'Young people are realising that they have more options; I've seen a rise in open marriages and polyamorous relationships, for instance, and the weddings people are having reflect that fluidity. I think the decline in religious constructs have relieved more traditional obligations.'

Women 'owning' their wedding day is something Williams has recognised, too: 'Many don't want their fathers to walk them down the aisle any more, seeing it as old-fashioned and anti-feminist,' she says. 'Couples are walking down together or even alone. And many women are doing speeches, which explains the new websites offering sample speeches for brides. You've also got to consider family

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Rather than sounding the death knell for marriage, these changes actually signal a long-overdue revitalisation of an industry steeped in patriarchal tradition. In times of societal upheaval, our faith in romance is greater than ever and weddings have been pulled firmly into the 21st century. There will be few objections to that.





THE NEW

GUEST-IQUETTE

If tradition is out and the lines are blurred for guests, how on earth does one behave at a modern wedding? Charlotte O'Shea, author of Rock My Wedding: Your Day, Your Way breaks it down

What to wear

With more brides opting for high street and mixing up their bridesmaids' outfit choices (two-piece suit, anyone?), figuring out a modern wedding dress code is a challenge. If in doubt, ask. Or at least casually mention that you're considering wearing a cute navy lace number from Self-Portrait. Ensure your look is individual by adding a statement bag, shoes or accessories. Guests should still avoid anything floor-length and white.

The Insta post

Imagine if the first photograph you saw of your big day was a blurry, unflattering camera-phone snap that popped up on somebody else's Facebook feed. Not cool. Always let the bride and groom post the first picture and take their lead on what is shared. There's a growing trend for couples requesting that their ceremony be 'unplugged'. And even if they don't, most brides would prefer to see your face as they walk down the aisle, not your flamingo-print phone case. In contrast, if they have a wedding hashtag, you'll know about it, so share the love.

The gift list

Most couples will provide guidance on their gift list or an online platform where you can contribute towards their honeymoon. If left to your own devices, then a thoughtful, personalised present or an experience – spa trip, dinner for two, sky dive – is memorable and something that can be looked forward to after the event.

Catching the bouquet

Many brides prefer to keep their bouquets these days, having them preserved forever, donating them to a homeless shelter or leaving them on a loved one's grave. But if it is up for grabs, be aware of the current trend for oversized floral bouquets and the ones made from vintage jewellery – you may need a safety helmet.

The free bar

It's a generous gesture to provide endless free cocktails. So much so that guests have been known to forget where they left their last mojito between questionable dance moves, so they simply order another – read: 'Congratulations on your wedding, here's an extortionate bar bill!' Don't be that person. Remember to also carry cash. Not every couple can afford an open bar or a venue that accepts credit-card payments.