

My solo wedding – everything but the groom!



‘I lie awake in my hotel room in Kyoto, nearly 6,000 miles from home, my stomach in knots. My mind is racing with thoughts of my wedding tomorrow. I take a deep breath and tell myself I don’t have anything to worry about. I can’t be stood up at the altar because the person I’m marrying is myself.’

A growing trend

The solo wedding is a growing trend in Japan. Like many of the women who use the service, I am a *spinster. I’m 42, and while all my friends are married or in long-term relationships, I sort of forgot to do it myself. In my late 20s, I thought I was dating the man I would marry, but he broke up with me abruptly. It was nearly 13 years before I had another relationship.



I used to think I was single because I lived in New York City during my 20s and 30s, where single women outnumber single men. Or because I travel so much for my work as a photographer. But I have many friends in New York in the same industry as me who have managed to meet, date, and marry. I've watched them get married, but I never thought I'd have a wedding of my own. Now here I am in Kyoto, awaiting my big day.

Getting ready for the Big Day



Yukiko Inoue has been running **Cerca Travel** for ten years. She is a 48-year-old divorcee. Two years ago, her colleague, 37-year-old **Natsumi Akai**, expressed interest in having her photos taken professionally in a wedding dress and the idea of the solo wedding was born. Since then, 130 Japanese women have paid ¥380,000 (£2,500) for a two-day package, including a dress-fitting, hair, makeup and a photo shoot – in short, everything except the actual ceremony.



I am met by Natsumi at the Ayumi Bridal dress shop. Natsumi is tall, slim, and beautiful. She tells me for her, the solo wedding was all about the dress.

‘For Japanese women, the wedding dress is a symbol of being beautiful,’ Natsumi explains. I, on the other hand, have never fantasized about wearing a wedding dress, and feel slightly nervous as Natsumi leads me into a private fitting room lined with puffy white gowns. But trying one on, I am shocked. I look in the mirror and I can’t help catching my breath. I barely recognize the radiant, elegant woman I see. Natsumi smiles. ‘You’re a princess!’

In the end, I try on eight dresses. I end up choosing the first one I tried.

The Big Day!

In the morning, I wake up for my big day, only to look in the mirror and see that my eye is red and oozy with conjunctivitis. In the hotel lobby I meet Natsumi, who pretends not to notice. We take a taxi to a fashionable part of town, where we meet wedding stylist Mayumi Hayashi and wedding photographer Yuhino Suzuki.

I rarely dress up – in fact, putting a brush through my hair is a big occasion. Mayumi is up for the challenge, though, and places my hair in curlers before beginning to apply my makeup, expertly covering my weeping eye. I put on my dress and look in the mirror ... the reality is matronly, I look like ... the Queen!

We make our way to the Shugakuin Kirara Sanso Japanese garden, where I am photographed getting out of the car, walking in the garden and standing beneath the blossom. I pose for the customary wedding shots. No shots with the groom, sadly. I personally would have liked a fake husband in my photos.



There is no actual solo wedding ceremony, which is a shame, because I had imagined promising to love myself for richer, for poorer. But Natsumi says clients are often surprised by the self-confidence they gain from it. 'A solo wedding is a celebration of yourself. Many women have given up on getting married, and this makes them realize marriage isn't the only goal in life.'



Back home

Upon my return from Japan, I started dating someone. I wondered if my luck with men would now change. Sadly, this relationship also ended abruptly. Perhaps I'll find someone one day – but I don't need to have a big wedding. I already have my photo album. I am surprised to find that I love showing it off – I happened to meet Oscar-winning actress, Marion Cotillard, so I showed her my wedding pictures. 'It's depressing,' she said. 'These photos are very sad.'

***spinster** = an unmarried woman
(very old-fashioned)