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From Russia Without Love: How thousands of lonely British men are being ruthlessly fleeced by a Russian 'e-mail brides' racket

By [Paul Bracchi](#) and [Helen Croydon](#)

Last updated at 11:53 AM on 12th June 2009

Some wear hotpants. Others the tiniest of mini-dresses. With names like Elanor, Olexandra, and Katerin, all are in full warpaint, teetering on vertigo-inducing heels.

More than 50 young women - at least three for every middle-aged man in the room - are plying their trade in the basement nightclub of the Palladium Hotel in Odessa in what was once Soviet Russia.

No, these girls aren't prostitutes; not in the strictest sense of the word anyway - but potential 'brides'.



Gary Gwilliam has spent £5,000 on his quest for a Russian bride but after taking Olga, right, shopping he never saw her again

Blushing they certainly are not. 'If a man looks a little bored, I just stroke his leg like this,' says foxy brunette Katerina, who giggles as she proceeds to lift her skirt and stroke her leg.

'That gets his attention back, usually.'

No sooner has she finished speaking than she is taking part in a party game designed to break the ice.

It involves couples taking to the dance floor with a balloon squashed between them; if the man presses too hard and the balloon bursts, he has to abandon her and move on to the next girl in line.

Nine of the 17 'suitors' are from Britain: among them a 47-year-old business consultant in a lounge suit from

Cambridge, a 42-year-old retail manager from Solihull, as well as a property developer and food importer.

But the journey to the altar, they are beginning to discover, does not come cheap in Odessa.

It costs \$300 (nearly £200) just to attend the function - organised by an internet 'marriage' agency - where they are now being introduced to potential partners, not over champagne, but 'sparkling' Ukrainian wine, which, along with the balloons, rather sums up the sleazy event.

In the next few days, their credit cards and wallets, bulging with dollar notes - it's always U.S. dollars, as the currency is so valuable here - will be drained even more.

It's hard to feel sorry for them or to distinguish who is really exploiting whom: the men who say they are looking for 'love' but, no doubt, expect sex as well, or the girls who shamelessly take them for every penny.

They probably deserve each other.

Either way, the scene which unfolded at the Palladium a few days ago is now part of an industry worth an estimated £50million.

Odessa has been called the 'pearl of the Black Sea' and 'Rio for the Russians'. Today, however, this historic city of cobbled streets, open air cafes, and baroque architecture, has another claim to fame - or notoriety - as the 'internet bride' capital of the world.

Odessa makes Las Vegas seem romantic.



Gary Cook and his girlfriend Oksana, who is saving for breast implants and dreams of posing for Playboy

There are now more than 100 introduction agencies in Odessa alone; a city which attracts up to 70,000 Britons every year.

The vast majority of them, if the past week is anything to go by, are single men of a certain age.

The event at the Palladium, a 'social' as it is called, was one of the first of the new marriage season, which starts in June and continues through the summer.

Already there are hundreds of British men in town, many of them middle-class professionals.

Most arrived in Odessa after typing the words 'Ukrainian Brides' into their computer at home.

Pictures of exotic beauties would have soon appeared on their screens. Women such as 'Diana', 29, with flowing chestnut hair - an accountant, apparently.

'I hope to find a beloved person, to create a family and to find love in my life,' she says. 'I am very sensual, affectionate,

tender and romantic woman.'

Or 'Tatiana', 29, who describes herself as a manager and who, naturally, loves 'children and animals'.

'I want to meet a soulmate, a person with whom I will be able to share my essence without being afraid to lose it,' she declares.

Yet, according to a local private detective, fewer than 30 per cent of such 'brides' are genuine.

Some are prepared to get involved in relationships - or even marry - but at least seven out of ten are what he calls 'scammers.'

Money, not marriage, is the motive.

Corresponding with the girls by letter or email - and there are many letters and emails - is costly.

Rather than charge a membership fee, you must buy 'credits' to write to the girls. These can be bought more 'cheaply' in bulk, 100 for £240, or just two credits for £10. One email requires one credit.

To contact the girls, a suitor must write via the agency who insist on a credit card payment first.

Once the paid for 'chitchat' begins requests for money to buy plane tickets, passports and visas - for trips to their potential 'husbands' in Britain that never materialise - will follow.



Brush up on your Russian: The industry is worth £50million but some agencies prey on lonely men with money

The most humiliating thing of all, however, is that the 'woman' you are 'speaking' to may not be a woman at all, but a man.

One agency boss we spoke to - a 50-year-old British ex-pat with greying hair and beer belly - admitted penning dozens of letters to male clients.

Those who visit Odessa to attend socials discover their potential partners may bear no resemblance to their photograph and expect to be wined and dined and lavished with gifts or even put up in apartments during the so-called courtship.

And at the end of it all? Usually, one word: *dasvidania* - that's goodbye in Russian.

It's no accident that Odessa is now at the centre of the booming marriage racket.

Ukrainian girls may enjoy the reputation of being amongst the most beautiful in the world, but there's also an old saying - that 'Ukraine gives corruption a bad name'.

Nowhere does this apply more than in Odessa where a blind eye is turned to the activities of the girls.

As an official in the mayor's office told us: 'It's good business for everyone - for the agencies, for the girls, for the city.'

But not, alas, for the 'victims', if indeed that is the right word.

One is sitting in a cafe, off Deribasovskaya Street, a pedestrian walkway in the heart of the city.

Jay Matthews, 41, from North London, is at pains to point out he is neither desperate nor sleazy.

'I am popular, I have money to spend, I'm a good conversationalist,' says Jay, a lifelong bachelor who runs a design company. 'I don't have trouble meeting women.'

The reason he is here, he says, is because he has difficulty identifying with British women of 'my age' and prefers the more traditional values of their Ukrainian counterparts.

'Here a girl takes pride in whipping up a *borsch* (beetroot soup)', he says.

'Back home, you would never get a woman who's proud, say, of making a chicken pie.'

There are a number of incentives which draw men to Odessa, but the culinary skills of the local women are probably not high on the list.

So how is Jay's search for a *borsch-making* bride going? Not well.

Jay signed up with a matchmaking agency several months ago and spent £200 writing letters to around ten girls.

'One sounded like she wanted marriage and babies in her letter,' he said. 'Then when I came over here and met her the other day it turned out all she wanted was free meals.'

A second date wasn't any more successful. 'She was really miserable and hardly spoke,' Jay explained.

'She was having a private joke with the interpreter who was with us.'

The joke was probably on Jay. Girls often pretend they don't speak English so the men have to hire a translator - usually at £18 an hour - and the fee is then split between the two of them.

Undeterred, Jay is now about to go on his third date.

'I am meeting this girl again soon but I don't think it is the same girl I wrote to because she looks nothing like her photograph,' he explained, before adding, without, it seems, the slightest hint of irony: 'I think the agency must think we are all really gullible.'

Gary Gwillam, 39, tells a similar story. To date, Gary has spent about £5,000 on holidays to Odessa, entrance fees to socials, gifts for the girls and writing goodness knows how many messages to them from his home in Cornwall.

'I first decided to come here because I was single and nearly 40,' he says. 'I thought it was about time I met someone I could settle down with.'

'My first two dates, which I'd arranged on the internet before I left the UK, stood me up. But the third date went really well.'

'Olga was a nurse and very funny and kept pinching my biceps. We spent two days together going for walks and I took her shopping for things like perfume and clothes. We did not spend the night together.'

'I felt like I loved her but then after the shopping trips and expensive meals, I never saw her again.'

'I've seen so many other guys like me. They really think the girls are interested in them, then the next day they are with someone else.'

'You have to see it to believe it.'

It's hard not to have at least a scintilla of sympathy for Gary, however foolish he may appear.

Apart from anything else, he is not some well-paid businessman but a driver for a large transport company.

Nevertheless, he represents rich pickings for the young women of Odessa, where the average wage is less than £120 a month.

Two broken marriages brought Guy Baker, from Maidstone, to Odessa. His story, as he begins to explain it, would seem to have all the familiar elements.

He signed up with a marriage agency five years ago and on his third visit met a girl called Viktoriya; she was 22, he is 40 with a bit of money (he runs a property website).

What's surprising is that Guy and Viktoriya are still together. He now spends most of his time in Odessa with her, returning regularly to his three children in Britain.

'It is much easier to have a relationship and make it work here,' Guy explains. 'The girls are happy as long as you look after them.'

Back at the Palladium, it's 1pm and potential 'brides', including one with impossibly long legs in an impossibly short dress, are making their way to the nightclub below.

The event is being organised by AnastasiaWeb, one of the biggest agencies in the city.

Inside, the retail manager from Solihull, who wishes to remain anonymous, reveals he has already spent £12,000 trying to find a permanent partner.



Brush up on your Russian: Nicole Kidman played a Russian bride in the 2002 film Birthday Girl

'I sent one girl £1,000 every month to help with her studies and her expenses,' he says.

'We saw each other once a month either in Odessa or elsewhere in Europe.

'But when I pushed her on getting married, she just stopped returning my calls. This time, I am going to make sure the

girl is serious,' he insists.

Well, they say there is no fool like an old fool. Or perhaps in this case that should be a forty-something fool.

One of the girls at the social, Olexandra, 23, from Mariupol, a steel town in south-east Ukraine, is brutally honest about her motives.

Every year, she makes the ten-hour train journey to the Palladium. 'I don't have a job so I come here for what I can get,' she admits, in between drags of her cigarette.

'It's a game really. Girls in Odessa only want money. They like men as long as they have money. It usually only ever lasts six months, maximum.'

The Anastasia website claims to have 36million online visitors annually and says more than 600,000 messages are exchanged daily by its members.

This amount of messages equals a great deal of money as each correspondence is charged for. And it doesn't end there.

Men are encouraged to send flowers, perfume and other gifts to their 'soulmates.'

A package on the website, called the 'Brilliant', includes 17 red roses, a teddy bear and heart-shaped balloon, and comes to £184.

A bottle of Clinique Happy perfume spray, on sale elsewhere for just £24, costs £178 to send via Anastasia.

Rates for translation services, for those who want to talk to women who don't speak English, are just over £2 per minute.

And so it goes on. The owners of 'Anastasia' are Elena Sykes and former husband David Besuden.

They met, they say, through an introduction service themselves, in 1992, and founded the agency the following year.

The company lists its address in the north-eastern U.S. town of Bangor, Maine, but employs staff and managers in Odessa.

'We have been known for our integrity and for running a transparent and honest business.'

Another agency boss is in the Irish Bar in Odessa, one of a number of establishments catering for the British.

Gary Cook is with girlfriend Oksana; she is 26, he is 45. Oksana dreams of posing for Playboy and is also saving up for breast implants.

The two met six months ago through someone who works for Gary at his so-called 'Odessa Bride Club', which he opened after moving to Ukraine from Lincoln, where he ran a recruitment business.

Gary has never been married but has three children by two different partners back in Britain.

He is among a small number of Britons who now run matchmaking agencies in Odessa.

Another agency boss is Matt McCarthy, who moved here from Dublin, in 2004. His Mat-rimony.com offers 'romance tours' - £913 for ten days - which includes an apartment and introductions.

'Men think they're getting a nice letter from a young blonde but often it's really from me - a 50-year-old bloke with a beer belly,' he admitted.

A website called agencyscams which lists the worst marriage agencies warns potential clients: 'If you are using any of these agencies, you are the biggest idiot on the face of the planet.'

And, depressingly, most of them seem to come from Britain.

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No fool like an old fool. Men are so easily lead - especially when they keep their brains in their trousers !!

- Jan, North Oxfordshire, 11/6/2009 11:36

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" The industry is worth £50million but some agencies prey on lonely men with money "

'Stupid men with no common sense' more like!

Muppets!

- Greg, Bedford, UK, 11/6/2009 11:34

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Sad muppets.

- Art, Manchester UK, 11/6/2009 11:33

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My marriage broke up after 14 years of marriage when I was forty. Realistically my age range for a new partner was say 32 to 44. I registered with some UK dating sites and the whole experience was the scariest of my life. When you are in your twenties and starting a relationship everything is easy and casual. But most British women on these sites had no intention of a relationship at all what they wanted was a sperm donor and time was running out for them. I removed my profile and accepted the fact that a single life isnt that bad. Luckily for me I met by accident a 26 year old Ukrainian lady and we are happily married for 5 years with one boy. I describe my life as happy and wonderful. British women in their mid to late 30's should be avoided at all costs. I had some turn up on their first dates with a check list. These guys are being fleeced at £200 a time but at least they get to keep their house so they are in safe hands. The Ukraine summers are lot better than the UK too.

- Phil, London, 11/6/2009 11:32

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Jonathon from Leicester UK, I'm glad your marriage has worked out but I think you have single handedly summed up why so many men can't find a bride. Imagine women only wanting to marry a bloke who could cook, there'd be a lot more single women! Why not just employ a housekeeper and be done with it?

- Milly Rayner, UK, 11/6/2009 11:32

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Do theses sad, deluded men seriously believe that these girls are after them because they find them attractive?

- Polly, UK, 11/6/2009 11:22

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Part of the Daily Mail, The Mail on Sunday & Metro Media Group

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