

Ukraine with love

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THESE WOMEN THAT A BUNCH OF MIDDLE-AGED WESTERN MEN HAVE PAID £2,800 EACH TO MEET THEM?
HELEN CROYDON JOINS A 'ROMANCE TOUR' TO FIND OUT

At -20C, it is so cold that it hurts when I breathe in through my nose. Yet this doesn't stop scores of Ukrainian women queuing outside the Palladium nightclub in 5in heels, sheer tights and just a coat over their cocktail dress. They are stunningly beautiful; flawless make-up covers any redness from the freezing temperatures. A coach pulls up, and about 25 smartly dressed middle-aged men from Britain, America and Europe pile off. There are no wolf whistles, no cries of "Phwoar". They take today seriously. They've paid £2,800 to be here, and they hope to find a wife.

The afternoon event, known as a "social", is one of the highlights of an all-inclusive Romance Tour to the coastal city of Odessa, on the Black Sea, organised by the international dating site AnastasiaDate.com. The site connects men from affluent countries with women from Russia and the former Soviet states (and Latin America, Africa and Asia through its three sister portals). Why are the women not scouring for potential suitors among their compatriots? Ukraine has a 10:9 female-to-male population ratio in a culture where being single post-25 is frowned upon, and an economy where the average salary is £200 a month.

Jeremy, 47, a good-looking lawyer from Birmingham, is attracting a huddle of beautiful twentysomethings, but he isn't interested. "They're babies. I want someone in their early thirties," he says. He has never married and is desperate to start a family. "Back home, if I meet a woman my age, she's too old to have children, but women in their thirties don't want a 47-year-old."

Steve, 50, a divorced businessman from west London, says nostalgically: "I loved being married. I loved having the same face to come home to. I

dated a doctor for a year. We even got as far as looking at houses, but her children have behavioural issues, and one day my son said he didn't like going to her house. That was it for me. We obviously couldn't live together, and what's the point of loving someone if you can't have all of them?"

Inside the Palladium, there are four women to every man. Cheesy music is booming, but very little alcohol is consumed. There's a dancefloor, a DJ and the occasional party game such as passing a balloon without using any hands. At the end of one of the socials, there is a beauty pageant. Fewer than half the girls speak English, but there are plenty of female interpreters on hand to speed along the tête-à-têtes.

Irena, 23, who is a biology student, joined the site via a marriage agency three years ago, and has been on 20 dates with foreign men: "In Ukraine, guys are lazy," she says. "They want women to support them. That's why the girls want to move."

All of the girls seem to despise their native men, but idolise their western counterparts. Europeans and Americans are "more romantic, gentle, polite, good fathers and less likely to cheat". Russian men are "chauvinistic, uncommunicative, aggressive, unfaithful and drink too much vodka". Many girls have stories of abusive exes, particularly Elena, a 21-year-old manicurist. This is her first social. Two hours in and she already has two dates set up for that evening.



LEFT OUT IN THE COLD

I met Nastasiya (not her real name) in 1998, on a site for Russian brides. There were fees involved, and you could pay to send flowers and gifts, too. I see now what a racket it was.

We met several times in Ukraine before she came to Britain for a holiday. I was 38, disappointed in love and drawn to her fiery passion. She was also in her late thirties, and desperate for a child. I was suddenly under huge pressure to marry her.

When we did so, a year later in Ukraine, I had doubts about her temper, but I was staying with her family in a town that was so isolated, it was near-impossible to back out.

Our marriage was disastrous. I soon

realised her mental health was fragile (she would scream at me daily), but culture shock was also to blame. The British weather was a big problem. Although Crimean winters reach -20C, our blustery wind made her miserable, as did our draughty buildings. Diet was an issue, too — if she didn't have borscht daily, it was a disaster. I felt isolated, although perhaps I didn't make allowances for her adjustment when she moved in.

When our son was born, her behaviour became odder. She was controlling and obsessive, particularly when enforcing her cultural fear of the cold — our son almost had to be bandaged before going outside,

and ice cream was banned. She also refused to spend the money I put into her account.

As our relationship deteriorated, she threatened to take our son back to Ukraine, and one day she left. The police and embassies were sympathetic, but there was nothing they could do. My son is nine, and I've only seen him a few times since they left. He has been brainwashed against me.

I would advise any man joining these sites to be careful. Learn the language and the cultural differences. Above all, find out about their past. Nastasiya and I are now divorced under Ukraine law, but not British law, so it's hard for me to move on.



Left Some of the Ukrainian women, who have come to a 'social' in the hope of finding a western husband, take part in a beauty pageant. Above and below The men and women mingle



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"After marriage, Russian men think they own their girl. They can do anything — scold her, beat her. The men who come here are serious about marriage because they have flown thousands of miles. Our men just care about sex."

It isn't all about romance. Becoming a wife in Ukraine brings status. "It's our sole purpose in life," says one 20-year-old, when I ask if she is in a hurry to marry. They take their duties seriously and expect men to do the same. "The man should be the head of the family," Irena says. "If there is not enough money from my husband's job, I would work, but nothing too hard. If a man comes home after a hard day, he wants a nice environment. The woman should provide a shoulder for the man, good food, maybe a massage. If a woman has also had a hard day and wants to talk about it, this creates a bad environment."

There are more than 1m male members of AnastasiaDate.com worldwide, and they don't skimp when it comes to finding love. Sammy, 50, a prison officer, spends £251 every month for 1,000 credits — that's 100 messages or 1,000 chat minutes, or a combination of both. He has never married and is a single dad to his eight-year-old son, but he wants another family: "I want to come home to a wife in a rocking chair with a baby and a big smile. Ukrainian women are bred to be wives and their family values are stronger. In Europe, women want to go to college, get a job and break through glass ceilings. I want a woman who will put me above everything."

It sounds a depressingly pragmatic way to select a wife. Yet all the men say they want to find "a soul mate". Every evening, they lounge in the hotel lobby, gossiping like girls, reporting on levels of "chemistry". But doesn't chemistry depend on an intellectual spark, I ask? These girls are educationally inferior and many have never left Odessa. "Love cements everything," Sammy reasons. "Just because we've had different lives, maybe we both like chocolate ice cream or sci-fi movies. You bond through shared experiences."

The men are mostly divorcees (AnastasiaDate.com carries out background checks to ensure they are not

married and have no past sex convictions), so perhaps the more misogynist comments are a kickback from past wounds. Phil is a 67-year-old, twice-divorced, semi-retired psychologist. "Middle-class British women are taught to have unrealistic expectations of how life should be. They talk about how they want men to inspire them, which, 20 years ago, wasn't the case. Women here are more appreciative of life. Here is a place where you can find a woman who is just a delight to be around."

I ask him if he considers whether the women find him a delight. He's 67: surely there's a niggle that a youthful bride may see nothing more in him than a ticket to a more affluent life? "Of course," he admits. "But the flip side is that here is a woman who'll be nice, treat me well, be kind, be happy. If she were into a career, then I'd be stupid to bring her to my country."

Such a rich choice of mates goes to some men's heads. "It's like picking your custom-made dream girl. You can take all the feminine aspects you like and look for one who has them all," William says. Perhaps he has confused willingness with desperation.

"The man is the boss because he pays, but they never ask us if we like them," says Ekaterina, 22, a customs officer. She joined a marriage agency when she was 18 and, within six months, was engaged to a German man. "When I joined, I thought, 'Can it really be true that you can feel the same mentality as someone from abroad?' But then I fell in love. He was handsome and very good to me, but he wanted to have five children straight away, one every year. I said, 'I want to be a lady and look after myself and not produce this many babies.'"

We shouldn't scoff. Multiple studies have found that when cultures start marrying for romantic love, divorce rates rocket. Gifts, dowries, bride prices, jewels and even political arrangements have formed the basis of many a marriage, along with optimism that love would follow. The Romans introduced the engagement ring as a means of securing a deposit on a wife. Perhaps a visa and a plane ticket are just the modern version. ●

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