

Romantic Britain

Love is in the air this month with Valentine's Day fast approaching which means an especially busy day for the residents of what must surely be the most romantic place in Britain – Gretna Green. This pretty village in the southwest corner of Scotland has been a marriage mecca ever since 1754 when a law was passed in England that prevented anyone under 21 from marrying without parental consent. But in Scotland the age was 16 and as Gretna Green is the first village over the border a tradition began of eloping couples fleeing north to 'tie the knot' (get married) often with angry fathers in hot pursuit. Trade was so brisk that blacksmiths were given permission to conduct the ceremonies over their anvils. It also gained a reputation as a venue for 'shotgun marriages' (dekichatta kekon). Gretna has retained its romantic image and each year over 4,000 couples choose to 'get hitched' (marry) in the village, a staggering 17% of the total for the whole of Scotland.

Another romantic place in Britain is Lisdoonvarna, a country town a few hours drive from Dublin where each year Europe's biggest matchmaking festival is held. For six weeks romance seekers from all over the world descend on the little town and its seven designated matchmaking venues for a festival of dancing, partying, horseracing and, hopefully, an encounter that will change their lives. The matchmakers (nakodo) for a small fee will 'set you up with' (arrange) a suitable match and provide a quiet room for the hopeful lovers to get acquainted with a chat and a cup of tea. The cost is between 10 and 40 Euros but is cheaper for ladies as there are 17 men to every woman at the festival. Nobody knows how many of these encounters lead to the man 'popping the question' (proposing) but interest in the festival shows no signs of diminishing with 20,000 attendees each year.

So Britain's link to a romantic past remains strong but there have been plenty of more modern developments and this month will also see a flurry of facebook flirting and a wave of speed dating parties across the UK. One modern trend that might astonish the Japanese is the habit of brides taking a short pre-wedding holiday to a sunny destination (or failing that some intensive sessions at the local solarium) to work on their suntan in order to be as brown as possible for 'the big day'. What would they make of that in Akita?

Written by Philip Patrick
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