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When we fall in love, two hearts meet as one. Two worlds, too. Today, couples embrace the excitement of cross-cultural connections. Weddings can present the perfect stage for two families to explore the merging of new love with ancient customs.

Wedding designer Sarah Goodwin of Daisies and Pearls in Portland regularly works with couples to honor the history and heritage of both sets of families involved. This trend will only increase, since "Maine is going to see a lot more people moving into the state," says Goodwin. "People from bigger cities see Maine as a place to get more bang for their buck." Because Maine is so affordable, and since such cultural mergers deserve to feel unrushed, graceful, and appreciated by all, "an event in Maine allows for a weekend celebration rather than just one night."

Why a whole weekend? Understandings deepen as they grow. In China, for example, to see if a couple is a perfect wedding match, the in-laws inscribe "their eight characters on a paper and put it on the family altar." Translating this to Vacationland, this ritual might happen at a rehearsal dinner or even beforehand at a destination wedding. "If within three days no disaster [befalls], this [means] the couple [is] well matched," according to the Chinese Idioms and Sayings Blog. Aha! Just enough time to include a lighthouse expedition and a lobster bake. The collateral benefit is to enjoy Maine with relaxing excursions while we discover each other's families as fellow travelers.

Last July, Adrea Lee and Raghu Chivukula celebrated their wedding day with two ceremonies. The first, a traditional tea ceremony, honored Lee’s Chinese roots, while the second followed the rituals of a Hindu wedding. How to pull off the miracle of bringing it all here? For Lee and Chivukula, a makeshift mandap was designed for the wedding at Marianmade Farm in Wiscasset. A mandap is an exquisite, intricate frame or four-pillared structure, similar to the Jewish chuppah, under which the couple is married. Jasmine flowers, symbolizing everlasting love, also played a central role in Lee and Chivukula’s ceremony.

“We gathered friends and family for a shortened Hindu ceremony on our mandap,” Andrea says. “Each ritual had deep spiritual and philosophical meaning. The ceremony is performed in Sanskrit by a priest and symbolizes a bond not only between two people but also two families. We owe so much to our parents, so it was important for us to have both Chinese and Indian ceremonies as a way of showing our gratitude and respect.”

Around the World in Maine
A wedding—the perfect place for a colorful collision of cultures & traditions.

BY OLIVIA GUNN
How profound then that the mandap was a bridge between two cultures.

Peel back a success like this, and you’ll often find considerate questions early in the process. “I always begin by asking which traditions the couple would like to observe,” Goodwin says. “I ask the parents as well.” At the center of it all, “the ceremony is the most important part of the day for my clients, so creating that true reflection of themselves is really special.”

THE LANGUAGE OF DANCE

If you’re not particularly interested in a long ceremony and would rather skip to the celebration, the reception makes for a perfect stage to express cultural customs. Rosa Noreen, ballet and belly dance teacher at Bright Star World Dance in Portland, says Middle Eastern Dance—or raqs sharqi, meaning dance of the East—is traditionally performed in three different areas of an Arab wedding. Dancing figures in the bride’s henna party. It reappears during the zaffa procession (the bride’s journey from her home to the groom), and it completes the circle dur-
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Nor-een explains that the belly dance is often performed at bridal showers, bachelorette parties, or even baby showers. “It’s a wonderful celebration of femininity, bringing women together in movement,” she says. “I’ve participated in all of these different elements locally with Lebanese, Iranian, Iraqi families, and non-Middle Eastern Americans who want to include the symbolism and the joy of the belly dance.” Sounds like the perfect way to shake up the reception with your bridesmaids.

LUCK OF THE IRISH

For some, like James McClay and his wife Meghan, the world is their backdrop. In 2014, the Portland residents celebrated their wedding in Ireland, where James grew up. “Meghan grew up in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. Her father has English heritage, and her mother’s side of the family is originally from Ireland. Meghan only really celebrated her Irish side,” James says. “I use celebrate loosely–she has a shamrock tattoo on her ankle. She’s very embarrassed about it since meeting me!”

The Emerald Isle may be out of reach for many of us, but for those who wear a shamrock on their hearts (or ankles), The Maine Irish Heritage Center, formerly St. Dominic’s Church, is one of the most beautiful landmarks in the city for a wedding.

The cathedral boasts stained-glass windows, a historic bell, and an aisle that could make any bride swoon. Music from the old country is another surefire way to transport your guests to County Cork. The McClays hired a traditional Irish group to play the harp, violin, and whistle during their Catholic ceremony. The McClays also honored their Irish heritage through small, traditional gestures. In an Irish wedding, a groom offers his bride a coin that represents all he possesses. James gave Meghan the same coin his own father gave his mother, plus a new one he’d bought just for her. Sometimes, a small but symbolic cultural nod can be the most significant.

As with any good fairy tale, love will cross mountains, rivers, seas, and even cultures. The ceremony may vary, but the goal is inevitably the same: two families with separate stories are bonded by love, vowing to draft a new story—one for future generations to look back on as they write their own.
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