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Feature: Chinese tourists experience traditional Serbian wedding through role-play in mountains

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KOSJERIC, Serbia, Oct. 5 (Xinhua) -- The groom fired his rifle into the air, the harmonica struck up, and laughter rippled through the circle dance. For 22 Chinese visitors in western Serbia, it was not a real wedding -- just a few hours of lively role-play to experience the charm of a traditional Serbian celebration.

In the hills above the town of Kosjeric in western Serbia, about 130 km southwest of Belgrade, Chinese tourists are discovering what it means to "marry into a culture" -- quite literally. The setting is Gostoljublje, a rustic ethno-tourism complex whose name means "hospitality" in Serbian, perched on the slopes of Mount Maljen.

Here, visitors were welcomed by a horse-drawn wagon, musicians tuning their harmonicas, and locals dressed in embroidered vests, traditional shoes and folk headwear, waving Chinese and Serbian flags in greeting.

Within minutes, the visitors themselves were swept into the spectacle. Dressed in traditional costumes, they took different roles and followed the rituals of a wedding that has been celebrated for centuries in Serbian villages.

"It feels very local and authentic," said Xiao Xiang, a Chinese tourist from London who took on the role of the day's bride. "The people are so warm. Even without speaking the language, I feel like I belong."

She recalled laughing as she threw an apple over the roof of a cottage, with coins hidden inside for prosperity. "It reminds me of catching the bouquet back home. Different traditions, but the same emotion," she added.

A STAGED WEDDING, A GENUINE ENCOUNTER

The staged wedding began at the bride's "home," a wooden cottage in the complex. Outside, tourists joined villagers in the kolo -- Serbia's traditional circle dance -- stepping hesitantly at first, then more confidently as the harmonica set the rhythm.

The groom, played by 18-year-old local Marko Marinkovic, waited with a rifle, as custom dictates. The rifle is not a symbol of force, but of joy -- in many Serbian villages, firing a shot into the air marks moments of celebration.

Then came the rituals. The apple hanging from a tree must be shot down, testing the groom's aim and luck. The bride must be "bought," as relatives humorously haggled over her price; and finally, the groom poured water into her glass to drink -- a custom meant to wash away the past.

"Each time I play the groom, I learn something new about my own culture," Marinkovic said. "At first I was nervous, but now I feel proud. It's a beautiful way to bring two nations together."

Throughout the ceremony, a caush -- the master of ceremonies -- explained the meaning behind each tradition. "The apple brings health and wealth, the grain brings fertility," he declared, as the bride tossed wheat over the roof and golden kernels rained down.

The procession continued by wagon, with the couple and their "in-laws" riding behind two horses toward their new "home." Old women sang verses that once accompanied real village weddings, their voices delicate yet resonant with feeling.

"It's so lively -- I'm having such a great time," said Chen Junyu, a 25-year-old tourist from Beijing. "The locals keep pulling us into the dance, always engaging with us. It feels like a role play -- today I am the cousin, tomorrow maybe the uncle."

A WEDDING FEAST TO REMEMBER

After the rituals, a long table awaited, laden with homemade bread, cheeses, roasted meats and pies -- all prepared on site. The food is inspired by the rich culinary traditions of western Serbia.

Here, too, the caush presided, explaining the customs of toasting and table etiquette. "When you come to a Serbian wedding, you leave your problems at the door," said Zeljko Sredic, owner of Gostoljublje. "It is about celebration, laughter and entertainment -- and we want guests to feel the same."

Sredic has been developing the complex for over 23 years, transforming a family farm into a blend of guest cottages, orchards, a restaurant and a stage for living heritage. "The wedding is the greatest cultural manifestation, as it contains everything -- clothing, songs, games, food and even the language," he said.

Around 2010, he staged and filmed a complete Serbian wedding as a cultural performance. Since 2019, nearly 300 Chinese groups have taken part in the staged weddings. "Tourism is not just about looking," he said. "It is to feel, to live, to experience."

A BRIDGE ACROSS CULTURES

For Chinese tour operators, the wedding offers a rare chance to immerse travelers in genuine local traditions. "We could take people to museums or landmarks," said Ding Tongtong, a tour leader with 54Traveler agency from Shanghai. "But a real folk wedding gives them something unforgettable."

She explained that Serbia was chosen as the centerpiece of the agency's Balkan itineraries because of its history and reputation in China. "People may not know all the details, but they know of Yugoslavia, of our past friendship, and they want to see what Serbia is like today," she said. Most of her travelers -- young professionals in their early thirties -- are drawn by the chance to participate, not just watch.

Nikola, a licensed Serbian guide from Belgrade who works with the groups, agreed. "If you know people, you can accept them," he said. "This wedding serves as both advertisement and promotion." For him, the paradox is part of the appeal. "It looks serious, but it's fun. And fun is the best way to learn."

TRADITION BROUGHT TO LIFE

The choice of a wedding as the centerpiece is intentional. Weddings in Serbia are not just private family occasions, but community events filled with music, food and rituals. They combine elements of intangible cultural heritage -- clothing, song, dance, cuisine and ceremony.

"Every tradition is there," said Sredic. "The bride and groom, the caush who directs, the barjaktar carrying the flag, the dever who is the best man, and the guests who make the celebration complete."

He emphasized that the goal is not to create a museum piece, but an interactive experience. "If tourists just stand and watch, it is only half real. If they dance, sing and marry, then it becomes alive."

The strategy has clearly resonated with visitors. Xiao, who played the bride in the role-play, described moments when she felt truly part of the village. "Even if we didn't share the same words, through the music and gestures, I could understand the feeling," she said. "I feel like a local, even if only for a day."

For Chen, the wedding was a lesson in culture and history. "It's more meaningful than just looking at buildings or landscapes," he said. "I will definitely recommend it to my friends."

For Xiao, Chen and the others, the day was more than a staged performance -- it was a chance to laugh, dance and celebrate alongside locals, to step into a living tradition, and to take a piece of Serbia home with them.

In the hills of Kosjeric, amid music, rituals and laughter, Chinese tourists carried a piece of Serbia home -- a cultural bridge forged through a single wedding, a single day and dozens of hearts connected across continents.

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