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# Wedding dress codes aren't always obvious

Sue Strachan **MAY 6, 2017 - 7:00 PM**

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The "Grove formal" scheme carried over to a wedding that Claire Thriffiley attended. (Photo supplied Picasa)

Mountain fancy? Come as you are? Wedding dress codes get creative and are sometimes confusing.

By age 22 I had not attended many weddings, so when I received an invitation to a Halloween costume wedding, I was confused and thrilled. Confused because, in my experience so far, there were rules for these things: white dress for the bride, suit or tuxedo for the groom, dressy attire for women, suits for men.

And thrilled because, hell yeah, costuming on Halloween!

While I forget what I wore (this was 1987), I do remember the bride was dressed as a devil and the groom as an angel. They were in their 30s and had already done the traditional wedding, and for their second walk down the aisle they didn't need to revisit the look of wedding #1.

That's not to say traditional weddings, first, second and beyond, can't be creative in their dress code, and for some there are religious and cultural customs to follow, but some couples want to have their personalities, interests or location shine on the big day.

And that's where "Mountain Fancy" (cowboy boots welcome) comes in. The Times-Picayune's Susan Langenhennig wrote in 2010 about her fashion dilemma for that wedding at a

mountaintop chapel in North Carolina. I followed up in 2014 with "Invitation dress codes decoded: From black tie to cocktail chic, what does it all mean?" about the creative terms, often confusing, about what to wear to parties.

Some are still confused.

Emily Post Institute addresses the most basic dress codes: white tie, black tie, black tie optional, semi-formal, festive attire, business formal, business casual, dressy casual, and casual. The institute states that the only time dress code is indicated on the wedding invitation is when it is black tie, and then it goes in the bottom corner.

So, I turned to friends, Facebook and otherwise, to query: "What has been the most unusual dress code you have seen on a wedding invitation or wedding/bridal shower/wedding party? And what did you wear?"

## **LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION**

Ah, the warm weather, palm trees, island breezes: the location (or even a mood) is favorite. "Tropical clothing" for a Florida wedding makes sense, but for one friend,

"Tropical chic" meant showing up in tropical finery, while "All the women showed up in white jeans like it was school pick-up," she says.

"Jazz Fest chic" conjures up thoughts of sundresses, shorts and wild shirts -- and for one guest, rain boots -- at the New Orleans Fair Grounds.

"Grove formal" read one invitation to a wedding party. And while the hosts' Ole Miss pedigree was an indication, I do have friends who would say, "Grove? Does that mean I wear green?" You can wear green but the school colors, red and navy blue, probably would be preferred. The New Orleanian invited to this party in northern Louisiana wore an alligator Lilly Pulitzer dress with pearls, "thinking it was the Southern lady uniform." The men donned linen or seersucker.

## **ATTIRE ART DIRECTION**

Guests are sometimes asked to wear a particular color.

"Dress code: black" made it clear for one friend, while the bride wore red. Another guest also got a black attire request, with the bride wearing magenta and the bridal party attired in the

colors of a rainbow, with even the flowers coordinated. A little more leeway was given on the invitation requesting ladies to wear black or white; the bride wore green.

The same woman who dressed "Grove formal" was also directed, as a bridesmaid, to wear "gold sparkle outfits" to the rehearsal dinner. The groomsmen did not.

## **COSTUME**

The Knot, a website devoted to all things wedding, opines that a couple shouldn't require guests to dress in costume, even though it is indicated on the invitation. Their answer to a query from a couple wanting to have a medieval-themed wedding: "Think of it as a 'Black Tie Optional' event, where ideally you would like your guests to come dressed in ultra-formal attire, but you won't make them unwelcome if they don't."

In my opinion, that's being a bad guest. The couple and their family are working on a fun party and it's not that hard to wear a costume or add a festive element. You are about to eat, drink and be entertained for free, so dressing in a costume should be a given.

While some invitations are clear -- "Renaissance," for example -- others such as "Audrey Hepburn" can confuse. Which Audrey? "Breakfast at Tiffany's" "Roman Holiday," or "My Fair Lady"? (Though history buffs could also go crazy on the Renaissance -- which part of Europe? To de' Medici or not to de' Medici?)

"Creative, casual, costume or conservative attire" attracted a wedding guest dressed as Elvis, while a leap year wedding asking guests to come in costume had a duo dressed as James Bond and Vesper Lynd, as well as some in chicken suits. "I thought people would wear fancy dress costumes," said the guest.

Two weddings looked for more definitive, but intertwined, themes: circus and Day of the Dead. For the circus-themed wedding, "Everyone including the bridal party was in painted skull face, dressed in black, red, and white; they also had fire and sword eaters. It was like a Day of the Dead Celebration, but a wedding instead."

"Glamorous black tie" read one invitation. Isn't black tie inherently glamorous? For men, a tuxedo is an easy answer, while for women it requires dressing up their ensemble more, maybe even veering into costume de rigueur (white tie) territory. (Costume de rigueur, if you see it on an invitation, means strictly formal attire: white tie and tails for men and full-length evening gowns for women.)

On the other hand, "Garden black tie" means, to me at least, for women to wear flats or wedges because sinking into the grass is an obvious hazard.

Weddings are joyous occasions, and to stay that way, the tone needs to be set early with the invitation. Make your intentions clear, and the fun will follow.

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