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Planes, trains and a

Having her precious wedding gown confiscated by South African customs at the last minute was a bride's worst nightmare. But here's how she turned the tears into joy to make her wedding day a colourful, unforgettable celebration of love and laughter

BY HEATHER WALKER

TAMARA Augustine-Gracias, a London-based South African, married her Portuguese sweetheart Rommel Gracias in her home town of Port Elizabeth last year.

Planning a wedding long-distance had its challenges, including dress fittings with a designer living in Ireland and subsequent red tape of SA customs that led to buying a whole new wedding dress. Not being able to walk down the aisle in her dream dress can be heartbreaking for a bride – so Tamara's friends and family sprang into action to help her make the best of a bad situation.

And in the end she realised that marrying her best friend surrounded by their loved ones was the most important thing.

We asked Tamara to share her whole crazy, frustrating and exhilarating experience:

Firstly, how did you and your husband meet?

We met on a night out at a Brazilian resto-club in London.

Was his proposal romantic?

Yes! I love everything Japanese and Rommel went to trouble of decorating his apartment to look like a Japanese tatami room. He had the help of his friend and best man Carlos, who between them covered the room in lights and flowers, complete with purple colour scheme – my favourite colour!

Rommel ordered sushi platters from a little Japanese market which his friend brought home and set out for us and he made hot gyoza too. Yum! He focused on the details, buying Moet – what girl doesn't love a bit of bubbly, he got a bottle of Meerlust Merlot – some South

African flavour – all followed by some delicious mochi for dessert.

He had asked me to meet him for dinner in Covent Garden one night in November but when we arrived, he told me the restaurant had made a mistake and did not book us in. Not wanting him to feel bad about it, I told him not to worry and we could go somewhere else instead. We decided to head to Angel. On the way he mentioned that he needed to drop his shoes at home – no idea why he had them, I never asked – so we went to his apartment and he gave me the keys to let myself in... and when I opened the door, I saw what he had done. He popped the question by placing my ring inside a chopstick box.

Why did you decide to marry in SA?

Let's face it, London isn't the cheapest place to have a wedding, but for tradition's sake, we opted to get married in my hometown, Port Elizabeth.

When and where was the wedding held?

The wedding was on 10 August 2013 at Mater Dei Catholic Church and our reception was held at Ukuphupha.

How did you choose your venue?

This was a tricky one as I did not go back to SA during the wedding planning, my parents and siblings got involved and looked at several venues. We wanted somewhere peaceful and scenic – hence the choice. It's not too far out and we got to enjoy a gorgeous sunset while listening to marimbas.

Was it a large or intimate event?

It was a very intimate affair – the best kind! We got to spend

time with everyone who came as this was important for us.

What special touches did you add?

We had family and friends from all over the world join us for our special day. We had guests from the Philippines, UK, India, Portugal, USA and Namibia. There were game drives and whale watching trips and so on to let those who had never been to SA get a taste of all it offers.

We chose a peacock feather colour scheme – it's a strong, vibrant palette that has ties to SA, Portugal and India where my husband was born.

A cousin of ours gave us a nickname a while back, 'Romara', so we rolled with that and incorporated it into the theme – Rommel is a designer so he did the illustrations for all our wedding stationery – he drew what is now our little family brand which we lovingly call the Romara tree – a tree with peacock feathers as leaves. This is something we want to expand on throughout our life as a family project, a brand we can live by.

We named our guest tables after love songs and challenged our guests to make sure they represented their table's song by dancing when the DJ played it. We also gave the guests a little instant camera to take photos of themselves with and used those to make the guest book.

My oldest nephew Tanith once sent a gift back for Rommel when I visited SA. It was a little blue bottle that he corked and sealed with wax with the help of his mum. It came with a note that said: 'Do not open until after marriage' – mind you we had only been dating for about a year so not something either of us were thinking about! Rommel

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Photos by Ryan Roake



runaway dress: an expat bride's tale



brought it back and opened it at the reception with Tanith – much to his delight! Inside it was a note simply stating: Now that you are married, can I have 2 “cozens” – definitely a highlight for us!

We also made a little ceremony of our dads exchanging South African and Portuguese flags – a sweet little touch I think – the uniting of countries.

Did you have support from friends and family in planning the event?

Family and friends were great! Our parents kept us so sane. My mum was a total rockstar! She made my bridesmaids' dresses, the flower girls' tutus and even the cake. No idea how she does it but she is amazing. Rommel's parents were so supportive too, his mum made the buttonholes for us – all 40 of them.

We arrived a week before the time and would have had no time to get anything done. From printing all the stationery to organising cars, my brothers were on the ball. They even took care of the decor and supported us so much more than we could have asked for. Our caterers were also amazing!

My bridesmaids were crazy good – my sister Lisa and friends Jeanine and Nisché. They knew I needed things before I even knew I needed them. One of them had to make a garter for me on the day because of some delays. They had a bag of tricks that had tissues, a glue stick and a few other bits and bobs.

I had Lisa and Nisché shopping for glass bottles for the souvenirs and Jeanine trying to find hundreds of peacock feathers – no task was too big for these ladies.

When we arrived in SA, we landed in PE to a welcoming committee – we were a group of 15 people from London and India who we picked up in Jo'burg. What we thought would be a lovely relaxing afternoon turned into mini hen and stag dos. Rommel and I were whisked away to meet friends and family for a day of fun and games! After almost 24 hours in transit, we were thoroughly knackered but it was a great start to an awesome wedding season.

What was the toughest moment of the whole experience?

The most difficult moment was finding out that my wedding dress was stuck in customs in Cape Town – this actually still makes me want to cry. I found out about two days before flying out to SA that my dress has been stopped in customs and they wanted me to pay pretty much the full price of the dress again to have it delivered to me. This was a shocker considering my friend had designed and made the dress and it was not of any commercial value. So many people got involved to try to get my dress back but to no avail. It was official on the Monday before the wedding that my dress, even if paid for, would not be with me for the big day. It had



been removed from its packaging so we didn't know what state it would have turned up in either way. You must know how much this broke my heart: no dress – what do I do? Everyone rallied around us, people my parents knew were offering me dresses, trying to help me. My dad mentioned a boutique called Lady Marmalade which sounded great but I kept thinking, even if I find something how on earth will it be ready for Saturday? Mine had been in the making for almost a year!

What was the best moment?

The best moment was sharing the best day of our lives with people we love. It wasn't an easy road but in the end, marrying my best friend surrounded by those who meant most to us was amazing.

Were you on a tight budget? If so, how did you save money?

Budget as always was hard. We set ourselves a monthly goal of saving a set amount and if after expenses and the monthly running costs we had any left, it went into the budget too. Our families were incredibly generous as well – way more than we could have asked for.

If you could go back and change anything, what would it be?

I would have insisted on carrying my original dress in my luggage! And probably would have preferred going back to South Africa two weeks ahead instead of just the one. Other than that, I wouldn't change a thing.

Do you have any tips for couples planning a wedding in SA from abroad?

Make sure whoever you pick as bridesmaids or best men are up for the task of being your eyes and ears and legs.

If you are able to, get a wedding planner as they will keep a check list for you – in my case, this was Rommel, my mum and my bridesmaids. I also used a wedding planner website.

Most importantly, what will be, will be. Don't dwell on anything that doesn't go your way! It's not the end of the world. Plus, a wise friend told me, if it doesn't work out on the day, nobody knows what it supposed to look like but you – so don't stress.

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