

Diary of a bride: CROATIA

Rowena Carr-Allinson travelled halfway around the world to marry her true love Mowgli Frere on the pristine shores of Sipan Island in Croatia.



Beautiful sunset on Sipan Island...



For us, it was a once in a lifetime opportunity



The simplicity of the island perfectly matched the theme of the day





Exploring the streets of Sipan Island...

Croatia's stunning coastline was the perfect backdrop

Rowena's tip:
 "Don't be afraid to ask friends and family to pack items in their suitcases! You'll need the space!"

Mowgli and Rowena had been together 10 years when he proposed on a trip in Oman. The Frenchman and his English bride-to-be decided that their wedding would be a destination affair on the beautiful shores of Croatia. And while it doesn't seem like an obvious choice of location, Rowena and Mowgli knew it was perfect. "We were visiting Zagreb (the capital of the Republic of Croatia) and it seemed like a great idea over a glass of Oujsko beer," she says. "They have lovely weather, nice wine and great food – what more could you want for the perfect wedding location?" For two years, the couple explored the Dalmatian coast, searching high and low for the right spot until they came across the island of Sipan. Here Rowena shares her story.

A destination wedding challenge: I knew planning a destination wedding wasn't going to be easy. As well as the language barrier, logistics and the sheer distance, there were other things to figure out – like the Croatian way of doing things. Sometimes when everything is 'fine' but you can't see anything being done, it gets a little worrying! Although we had a clear vision in our minds, we'd have to wait to see if it would all pan out according to plan!

First things first... My first step was to find help on the ground, in the shape of the lovely Ines Nanic who runs Dubrovnik Events.

A wedding planner with years of experience, we met and instantly became friends. Ines and her husband Marin were our eyes and ears on the ground, and helped us with every little detail. They did everything from visiting locations, taking pictures and getting quotes to booking our suppliers. They introduced us to the fabulous Kristina Skvrce of Do You Wed Me for our flowers. They also organised sofas, cocktail tables and oil lamps hire, and transport, and advised us to book Ivan, the DJ who kept us dancing all night! They even arranged for the legal paperwork to be done ahead of the wedding and sweet-talked the registrar into performing the ceremony on the beach.

There is no way we could have done it without them. Although, Ines went into labour 24 hours before our wedding! Luckily for us, Marin was a total pro, coming to help on the day with the final preparations.

The planning begins: The complex logistics of our wedding meant the idea of traditional invitations didn't work for us, so we opted for a practical website for our guests, which became known as 'Le Wedding'. As Mowgli designs websites for a living, we were able to have a great-

looking site with all the necessary info from flight details for our guests coming in from Geneva, Paris and London, to hotel options, activities and other useful details like wedding lists and dress codes. To keep everyone up-to-date, we also sent out regular email newsletters to all our guests.

We got Mowgli's fantastic Hackett suit in Paris and my mother spoiled me with a beautiful Spose Di Gio dress from a designer in London.

Because it was made-to-measure, I arranged to head back to London for final fittings a couple of months before 'Le Wedding'. It was there that we found our photographer (the wonderful Sam Bowen) and started all the paperwork proceedings, ordering birth certificates to ensure our union was legal.

Long-distance decor: Decorations on a budget are hard to come by in Croatia, so Ines advised me to bring as much as possible with me. I duly ordered everything ahead. My favourite items were bunting I had made (having found the fabric in the US), lovely ribbons and hearts, one made from rosebuds, the other twigs, as well as a gorgeous personalised lime green heart from the brilliant Notonthehighstreet.com

I also got lovely white paper 'lace' bunting and cute heart print jam jar-style candleholders from the Dotcomgiftshop.com for our table

decorations. And, of course we made a few trips to Ikea for little things like tealight candles, paper lanterns, picture frames and fans to keep our guests cool.

My sister-in-law, Eve, and friend, Kim, who both travelled from America, were great, packing bits and pieces in their suitcases – glow-in-the-dark bracelets, the pink fans, personalised coasters and fuchsia silk gerberas which were great finishing touches for the day. My mother brought in my parasol, dried petals and the kids' gift bags while bridesmaids also had stuff stashed away in their suitcases. It was a real joint effort!

A week before... We decided to head to Sipan a week before the big day to finalise preparations. Driving down through France and Italy with the car packed to the rafters was an adventure! We had all our wedding essentials, including a few cases of our favourite champagne.

Our guests were travelling a long way to come to Dubrovnik so we knew we had to treat them like royalty.

We did as much as we could to negotiate group hotel rates, arranging taxis, babysitters and we picked the majority of our guests up in person with a fleet of minivans from the airport.

Dubrovnik, a fortified city built by the Venetians, is a must-visit, so some guests made a long weekend of it, indulging in some luxury at the wonderful Excelsior Hotel before travelling to Sipan for the wedding. It was totally surreal and wonderful to see our nearest and dearest in this exotic location.

The plan was to spend as much time together as possible, so we organised a rendezvous in a beautiful little restaurant, Revelin, in the Old City of Dubrovnik before setting off for the Elaphiti islands, the small archipelago that includes Sipan Island. The cruise was the perfect way to unwind and travel together to our destination.

The Friday night party... We wanted an informal barbecue night in the hotel's Palm Garden the night before the wedding. It was cosy and informal so people could mingle and get to know each other.

The party started at sunset, and our guests were sipping cocktails, listening to Mowgli's funny welcome speech, and getting to know each other. The barbecue went by too fast, and it was soon time to call it a night, even though I would gladly have sat under the stars, chatting and drinking wine with my favourite people all night!



Taking a moment to enjoy our wedding day!

A laid back morning: We decided to have the wedding late afternoon so everyone could enjoy the day doing their own thing. Some went hiking, some kayaking, some swimming, others had lazy sleep-ins, but with us all in the same hotel, we were constantly bumping into a friendly face, which was lovely.

The morning of the wedding, Mowgli organised a France vs England football match. Against the ocean backdrop, the boys played and bonded while the girls cheered on. Others were dispatched on various missions to do all the things we'd totally forgotten about – like putting the rice in baskets and writing out the seating plan. Our only problem seemed to be the weather. The islanders were adamant that the brilliant weather we'd had all week was about to turn. We crossed our fingers and by 4pm with no sign of rain we stuck to Plan A.

Getting ready... The famous bridal flutter suddenly surfaced. It's odd, but an hour before walking down the sandy aisle the significance of it all hit me like a tonne of bricks.

I always cry at weddings so I just knew this time would be no different – probably worse. Trying to practice my vows I started to sob. Josephine, the hair and makeup artist, scolded me while she applied the waterproof mascara, and soon we were off to my mother's room where the dress awaited with my flower girls and boys.

I was nervous but also really impatient. My bridesmaids Lucy, Claire and Tash were brilliant at fussing over me.

As we approached the beach I could hear the song we'd chosen – *Somewhere Over The Rainbow* by Israel Kamakawiwo Ole. To see all my favourite people standing there cheering and smiling was amazing. I was hit by emotion again and struggled to hold it together as Dad and I walked down the aisle. I found out later, that by this stage, the best men, Mowgli and most of the guest were in tears. There was something in the air.

The ceremony: The ceremony was in two parts: the official, legal part and the 'spiritual' part. The formal 10-minute ceremony in Croatian (with an interpreter!) was actually very sweet.

After we were legally married, my Dutch aunt Liesbeth stepped in for the 'spiritual' part. She was brilliant, enthusiastic, warm, funny and bilingual! We replaced traditional readings with a piece from the *Book of Love*, and exchanged vows. That's when the tears flowed freely! There really wasn't a dry eye on the beach, including the Croatian waiters and Sam, the photographer, who swears he never cries at weddings!

I used to be skeptical about people saying it's the best day of their lives, but it's quite true. For us, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to let all that emotion pour out, surrounded by those we care about.



Rowena's tip:
"Have a Plan B in case it rains!"



A nervous bride almost ready to walk down the aisle!



Our gorgeous flower girl ready to go!



Rowena's tip:
"Find a local planner who can recommend suppliers & liaise with them on the day."



Dancing at the Friday night beach party!

- Who:** Mowgli Frere & Rowena Carr-Allinson
- Where:** Hotel Sipan, Sipan Island, Dubrovnik, Croatia
www.hotel-sipan.com
- The planners:** Ines and Marin
www.dubrovnikevent.com
- The florist:** Kristina Skvrce
www.doyouwed.me
- The photographer:** Sam Bowen
www.sambowenphoto.com

Time to celebrate: After the champagne toast and my father's speech, we took half an hour out to take some photos while our guests ambled back to get ready for dinner, some even going for a quick refreshing dip before the festivities.

The staff, still worried about the forecasted storm, warned us the party at the beach later might be impossible but, by then we were on such a high, we weren't worried about anything!

Dinner was a grilled surf and turf with everything from steak to lamb, squid, shrimps and seafood salads followed by tiramisu and profiteroles, all served with local wines. I was quite surprised when oysters turned up, as I'm sure we never ordered them but perhaps they got lost in translation?

We loved the amazing speeches and skits from my Dutch family, the best men, my bridesmaid, the mums and siblings and the fantastic *Jungle Book*-themed song from the British crowd. A quick emotional thank you speech from us and it was midnight, time to head back to the beach for some dancing.

The beach party: Marin and his team had worked really hard to set up lanterns, sofas, glow-balls and the DJ's kit. It looked amazing and very dramatic with the lightening on the horizon. We did our first dance, a bit of mooching around to Robbie Williams *Feel* interrupted by our take on *You're The One That I Want Grease* routine which took everyone by surprise. DJ Ivan kicked off the party with a little Black Eyed Peas, which worked a treat. The dance-floor filled up and the atmosphere was electric.

About half an hour later Marin came to see me with a big grin saying

"The storm has passed. You can stay out as long as you like." So, we did. Until sunrise!

The day after... With departures all day, we'd booked taxi boats from the harbour and waved everyone off. Instead of being an anti-climax, the goodbyes were wonderful too: plenty of hugs and kisses, followed by so much waving, my arms felt like they'd drop off!

That night we had dinner at Marko's, a lovely little restaurant on Sipan, with the remaining guests. The family-run seafood restaurant, known as one of Croatia's finest, was just another incredible bonus that made the wedding so special. Ten days after arriving, we were the last on the island (but one!) still high on happiness, looking forward to our two-month honeymoon!

A month later... When we decided to get married on a beach in Croatia, we knew it would be a happy event, but we didn't realise how special it would be for all who attended. We received the kindest cards, texts and emails. Obviously our friends and family are all very polite, and we expected them to say it was great, but we never expected so many of them to tell us it was the best wedding they'd ever been to, that they loved it and that it had been truly magical.

If I were to do it all over again there are a few things I would have tried to plan better, but the simple truth is that you can't do everything, so a lot gets left to luck and goodwill on the day. And to us, it was just as it was supposed to be – relaxed, happy and beautiful. ☺