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WEDDING | JOURNEY

My Big Fat *Gay* Wedding

Find out how two *Jane and Jane* writers pulled off their dream wedding in Aruba. Hint: It involved subscriptions to a mere 12 bridal magazines.

BY JUDE MEDEIROS & JEAN-MARIE NAVETTA

JUDE: OH, WHERE TO BEGIN.

Eight years ago, newly relocated from New York to Northern Virginia, I found myself single and lonely. A friend of mine told me about PlanetOut.com, so I went online to do a potential girlfriend search. Not being skilled in the art of online dating, I answered a few questions and up popped 500 matches. Feeling overwhelmed, I sent one e-mail to the very first match—with an alleged 100 percent compatibility—who, incidentally, had no photo attached. (Brave, right?) As it turned out, “the girl” was also living in Northern Virginia, but she hailed from New Jersey. We bonded almost instantly about how much we missed bread and pizza from “home.”

Logically, our first date was at an Italian restaurant. We got to know one another better by crunching on garlic bread and slurping up spaghetti. As we ate and talked, our bond strengthened as our mutual passion for complex carbohydrates became clear. We knew we’d made a special connection that night, both longing to be in New York, having our very first meal.

Who knew that eight years later I would forever swear off bachelorhood and

walk down the sandy isle into wedded bliss? I surprised everyone—especially Jean-Marie, the girl from Jersey.

This is how it happened: Driving home to New York one weekend to get my hair cut, I called my sister. “Nancy, I am going to propose to Jean-Marie and I want you to come ring shopping with me.” The first shot had been fired.

Following her recovery from shock, my sister helped me find the perfect ring—a Caribbean blue diamond, the color of the water in Aruba. The Caribbean island has always been our favorite place to visit, and now it would make the perfect backdrop for my proposal.

I held on to the ring for two months, anxiously awaiting our vacation. The first night there, on the balcony, I got down on one knee and recited the one-liner it took weeks for me to figure out: “Jean-Marie, I love you. Will you marry me?” I did it! I knew I could! Even after seven years of swearing off marriage, avoiding commitment and resisting her increasingly strong overtures, I said it!

And what did my Jersey City princess reply?

“Not without a ring, bitch.”

PHOTO: DIANE KEIJZER

“Who knew that **eight years later** I would forever swear off bachelorhood and walk down the sandy isle into wedded bliss? I surprised everyone—especially Jean-Marie, the girl from Jersey.” —*Jude*

PLANNING A DESTINATION WEDDING

• **DO YOUR HOMEWORK:** The climate for gay weddings varies widely around the globe. Become well-versed in this topic before you commit to a location. *Out Traveler* is a good place to start, and *Fodor's* and *Lonely Planet* often include details on LGBT destinations.

• **BE UPFRONT FROM THE START:** How can we say this gently? *Be out.* As the saying goes, first impressions last. If you're comfortable when you meet with your wedding team, you'll have an opportunity to set the tone for the working relationship.

• **HIRE A PLANNER:** Remote wedding planning is stressful, so (if possible) meet with a planner in person. Gauge his or her comfort level. Are they at ease with you? If not, move on and find someone who is. Be sure they can connect you with the vendors you'll need.

• **PERSONALIZE IT:** It's your day, so focus on what you love. Nothing has to be traditional. Develop a theme and carry it through everything you do—from the invitations to the gift bags, from the vows to the cake toppers, make it reflect you. Most places offer standard wedding packages, but know that you can start with one of these and personalize it to fit your style.

• **CREATE A CALENDAR:** Any good wedding magazine has a timeline for what projects need to be completed and on what schedule. Develop your calendar early and stick to it to avoid surprises. Some great online checklists are found at gay-friendly wedding site The Knot (www.theknot.com).



PHOTO: CARLA HELD

• **DIVIDE THE TASKS:** There's a lot to do, and every wedding magazine includes at least one article about the exasperated bride and her frustrations with an unhelpful groom. Don't get into that pattern. Make decisions together, but execute ideas separately, determining assignments by talent and ability.

• **SHARE THE EXCITEMENT:** Set up a Web site. (We used Weebly to create a simple site in a few hours.) Don't just include your registry, but tell stories, chronicle the planning, and allow people to comment. It also gives you a place to send your vendors, so they can get to know you better and provide better service.

• **CONSIDER HAVING AN EVENT FOR FRIENDS AT HOME:** Your destination wedding guest list will be limited, so have a party or get-together when you come home for friends and family who couldn't be there. Share your photos from the ceremony and continue to celebrate!

That's right. But for once—and I mean once—I managed to stop her in her tracks and produce eye leakage (she would never admit to tears) as I held up the ring to her snarling but pretty face.

JEAN-MARIE: The answer, of course, was yes.

But I'd like to point out two things. First, I'd been talking about marriage for years, wondering why, despite making a lifelong commitment to one another (we do share cats and a mortgage, after all), Jude wouldn't get married. I was, to put it mildly, frustrated. Why shouldn't we have the same public declaration of love as everyone else? And, more important, why would she deprive me of the opportunity to be the center of attention, decked out in the puffiest dress I could find? The situation was painful. I frequently found my left hand, lacking the weight of a ring to hold it down, randomly flying up and hitting people nearby.

The second is that in spite of the “eye leakage,” my mascara remained flawless.

Once the perfect ring had been placed on my finger, we had to start letting people know. The first call was to my parents, who, in spite of their rainbow flag-waving PFLAG credentials, were shocked—more by the fact that Jude asked than by the prospect of the wedding itself. But once they knew, they jumped into action, locating a herd of attorneys to codify the rights that we, unfortunately, do not immediately gain from the transaction (whatever might be happening in Massachusetts or California).

The planning commenced immediately. The morning after the proposal, Deborah, the resort manager at Bucuti, approached us. “I heard that there was quite a ruckus last night! Congratulations! We're all hoping that you'll plan to tie the knot here on our beach.”

Say no more, sister. We were on it. And within 24 hours, we'd received a phone call from the wedding planner and congrats from the entire resort staff. I'd subscribed to a dozen bridal magazines and, by 5 p.m., been called “Bridezilla” for the first time. Before my sunburn even had a chance to peel, we'd developed a logo-JM2 to reflect our dual initials—and designed a Web site so that family and friends could log on and

follow the planning throughout the year... and, of course, access the registry.

JM²: For the next year, we spent nearly every night on dueling laptops, scouring the Internet for ideas. The result was the creation of a wedding that incorporated all that we collectively and separately love.

A few weeks after getting engaged, we sent a save-the-date letter to our friends and family. (We narrowed the invitation list by asking ourselves who we would *not* want to kill after spending a week together on a vacation/honeymoon/wedding extravaganza.)

About six months later, we sent the real invites. Ours took the form of retro travelogue booklets, designed by Jean-Marie's brother, featuring photos from previous trips to Aruba, a schedule for wedding events, and information on a private sunset sail, which we decided would be much more fun than a rehearsal dinner.

To keep the excitement building, about three months out, we sent another letter containing Aruba travel tips and weather information. The package included custom-designed, personalized luggage tags, which matched our blue and orange theme, for each guest. We were asking for a big travel commitment from guests, and we wanted to keep them feeling appreciated and

involved throughout the year. (Jean-Marie's subscriptions to all of those bridal magazines paid off with lots of fun ideas to do this.)

A big part of our success was sharing all of the tasks, so no one felt overextended. Nashette, our outstanding wedding planner, kept in close contact with us via weekly e-mail updates; she even scheduled Webcam meetings so we could talk in real time. Jude focused on developing a carb-laden menu, secured the island's premiere steel drum player, mapped out the table setup, and, with Nashette's help, located bottles of Taittinger's Rose (our favorite Champagne) for the event. Meanwhile, Jean-Marie used her art skills to custom design every wedding item guests would see, from the contents of gift bags to the hand-bound wedding programs, and from the name cards to the menus. It was JM² all around.

The only thing we did not share was our vows.

JUDE: The big day, May 18, had finally arrived—and I had a stomachache. My nephew, Dennis, waited with me as I downed ice water and paced. When I heard “Is This Love” by Bob



Marley on steel drums, I knew it was my cue: time to walk down the beach into un-singlehood.

I reached my place in the sand and waited to see Jean-Marie. With us both being old-fashioned, and with Italian superstition looming, I

was banned from seeing her before the wedding. But when I laid eyes on her, she looked so amazing that I got visibly choked up. I instantly knew there was no place I would rather be than here, making my commitment to her.

JEAN-MARIE: With the assistance of my five-person entourage, getting ready was quite an event, blissfully without the drama I'd grown to fear from watching too many episodes of *Bridezillas* (“Engaged. Enraged. About to be committed.”). All of the pieces were in place: the old, the new, the borrowed and the blue—in the form of toe rings with blue crystals, much to my mother's horror—and I was ready to go. More or less.

The trip between my room and the beach was, psychologically speaking, the longest of my life. Armed with last-minute warnings from a friend (“Don't cry! Your makeup will run!”) and Nashette (“*Now! Walk now!*”), I started the walk down the aisle. But the minute I saw Jude—as the debonair groom—my nerves settled and I knew I was exactly where I should be.

JM²: The ceremony was perfect, incorporating poetry, philosophy and literature. In front of 12 of the people we love most, on the beautiful sands of Eagle Beach in Aruba, we had the opportunity to publicly commit to a lifetime of love, friendship and much more.

The “much more” came when the reverend advised us to always remember the thing that brought us together. Never one to pass up creating a memorable moment, Jude leaned in and whispered the sweet word that our relationship started with: “carbs.” ■

PHOTO: DIANE KEUZER

