

Marrying Overseas: 'I Do' in Greece

By KATY KOONTZ: KATY KOONTZ is a writer who lives in Knoxville, Tenn.
Published: April 23, 1989

WHEN my significant other and I decided to get married, we wanted what all engaged couples want - a wedding to remember. But our dreams had nothing to do with posh country clubs, phalanxes of attendants and a satin and lace cathedral train. We longed for an incomparable setting, which for us meant the Greek island of Santorini.

Getting married abroad, we discovered, is a confusing and frustrating but ultimately rewarding experience. There aren't any guarantees, and success depends not only on organizational skill but also on perseverance, a sense of humor, faith and a little luck.

A helpful Greek put it well in one of the first letters of advice we would receive: "As with many things in Greece life changes. So our advice to you is to be flexible with both your time and your patience . . . Life can fall apart anywhere along the line!"

Thus warned, we began our adventure, asking the Greek Consulate in New York for information about the procedure we should follow to insure a legal marriage. However, both the American Embassy in Athens and the State Department in Washington told us that the Greek Consulate's information - despite his later protests to the contrary - was outdated.

Armed with four updated pages of regulations, we had our birth certificates translated at the Greek Consulate in New York. the first documents we would need We then spent several months writing letters to the American Embassy in Athens, the Greek Embassy in Washington, the Greek Consulate in New York, a couple of business contacts in Greece and the person who would perform the ceremony, the Mayor of Oia, a fishing village on Santorini where we had decided to wed. Several phone calls were also made to the Mayor, the American Consulate in Athens and a tour operator in Santorini, who had offered to help with the wedding arrangements after we were put in touch with him by a friend. .

Last May we left for Athens to get the required affidavit from the American Embassy attesting to our eligibility to marry. This was the second document we were required to obtain. I was surprised at how easily we whizzed through formalities at the embassy: everything was going according to our carefully constructed plan.

But then we arrived in Oia.

We had visited Santorini, also known as Thera, on our first vacation together and decided on Oia on the recommendation of a friend who knew that we wanted an intimate setting for the ceremony. I had made an appointment with the Mayor several months beforehand by mail and the appointment had been confirmed several times in telephone conversations made by a friend who speaks Greek. The next day (a Friday the 13th, no less), when we tried to keep our appointment with the Mayor she wasn't there. She wasn't even on the island. She hadn't left word for us and no one knew when she would return. Further, the town secretary, a man who everyone called Petros, was the only one in Oia who knew how to grant us a license, and he was also out of town indefinitely.

An old man hanging around the empty offices shrugged when I tried to get more definite

FACEBOOK

TWITTER

GOOGLE+

EMAIL

SHARE

PRINT

REPRINTS

MOST EMAILED

MOST VIEWED



1. DAVID BROOKS
I Miss Barack Obama



2. New, Reading-Heavy SAT Has Students Worried



3. BASICS
New Ways Into the Brain's 'Music Room'



4. WELL
Simple Remedies for Constipation



5. Traveling Through Venezuela, a Country Teetering on the Brink



6. Artur Fischer, Inventor With More Patents Than Edison, Dies at 96



7. OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR
When Addiction Has a White Face



8. How Would You Do on the New SAT?



9. OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR
I Am Not a Kook



10. SPORTS OF THE TIMES
Cam Newton, Sacked Six Times, Brings Himself Down

[Go to Complete List »](#)

[Show My Recommendations](#)

information. "Come back in five days," he suggested. The next several days featured a series of Kafkaesque misadventures. We found out there was a Vice Mayor of Oia who would perform the ceremony. But he didn't know the regulations, didn't speak English and didn't leave us feeling very confident.

Two days later my parents and my fiance's parents arrived from the United States. The next day the Mayor returned without the secretary and without knowing when he'd arrive, but she said she'd marry us in two days with or without him. We were touched, but not convinced; she didn't know the regulations either.

BY the next morning the Mayor had good news: Petros would be back the following day and we were to meet with him at noon to apply for the license. The wedding would be that evening.

At noon the next day, a Wednesday, we waited eagerly for the all-powerful Petros as several people crowded his office with various official requests. But 10 minutes after we arrived, we realized something was very wrong. The secretary started shouting at the Mayor, angered because he was too busy to eat his lunch, a container of yogurt that he clutched as he burst out of his office and through the door to the building. Petros had just quit. We sprinted after him, finally convincing him to return only after I staged a crying fit.

All was almost well, but not quite. Because the application process was long and complicated, the Mayor asked us to return the next day - after the wedding - to finish the paperwork. But we'd planned to be on a 7:45 A.M. boat to another island in the morning. We convinced them to finish it in one sitting, and it took two hours.

The rest is pure fairy-tale-come-true. The Mayor arranged for an old, salty violinist and a bouzouki player to lead bride, bridegroom and parents in a long procession through Oia's narrow, winding streets, a maze of whitewashed buildings perched atop red lava cliffs that overflow a huge volcanic caldera. Greeks and tourists applauded and snapped photos along the way. After the 15-minute ceremony in a small public office, the Mayor led us in spirited Greek dancing. And as the musicians wound back through the streets with us, bystanders cheered and threw rice. It was worth every bead of sweat.

We had decided on Santorini for sentimental reasons, and it was therefore the only overseas place we considered. While other countries (like France) are much more difficult as places for foreigners to marry than Greece, several others (most notably Jamaica and Scotland) are much easier.

Most countries have the same basic requirements for civil weddings, according to the State Department, although each adds its own twist. France, for example, has a 30-day residency requirement and West Germany requires the couple to produce their parents' wedding certificates.

In addition to passports or other proof of age with photo, each couple will generally need certified copies of their birth certificates (not photocopies) and copies of death certificates if either partner has been widowed or a divorce decree if either partner has been divorced. Every document must be translated, often with official seals, a process best done in the United States at the country's embassy or consulate.

Most countries also require an affidavit of eligibility that attests that neither partner is already married and is not related to the other (a document that does not exist in this country). Although it can sometimes be obtained in the United States at the embassy or consulate of the country in which the marriage is to take place, it must usually come from the American Embassy in that country. The fee at all American embassies is \$4. Extra documentation (and many extra hours' work) is required for a religious ceremony in Greece and other countries.

Other conditions for civil marriages vary by country and may include blood tests, minimum residency requirements, the posting of an announcement, sometimes over a period of several weeks, declaring the couple's intention to marry (called posting the banns) and waiting periods. Some countries also insist on a minimum number of witnesses and a minimum age, or notarized parental consent forms.

Information on most countries' regulations can be obtained from the State Department. Write to the Citizens Consular Services, Room 4811, Consular Affairs Bureau, Department of State, C Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20520; telephone 202-647-3444.

The American Embassy in the country where the wedding will take place should be asked in writing to confirm the requirements. However, weddings cannot usually be performed by embassy officials. Local clergy or public officials almost always do the honors.

AFTER the wedding, the American Embassy can authenticate foreign marriage documents (cost: \$36), although this is not a legal requirement. A legally performed marriage between American citizens in the country where it takes place is generally also legally valid in the United States, although the exact terms of the recognition may vary from state to state.

Couples planning an overseas marriage should contact their State's Attorney General to check on whether such marriages will be recognized as valid. The State Attorney General is the final authority on such a question. New York does recognize foreign weddings of American citizens, as does Tennessee, where we now live. For the rest of our married life we will have to check with the Attorney General of any new state we move to.

Those planning nuptials on foreign soil may face one other hurdle - incredulous family and friends who think you are being a bit extreme and who may well be hurt if they can't witness the wedding. We solved that problem by holding a reception - in all our wedding finery - after our return to the United States.

For us the combination of exchanging vows in an exotic and unusual setting and celebrating back home in the more conventional manner was the perfect compromise - just the right blend of creativity and custom. TYING THE KNOT IN THE CARIBBEAN, EUROPE AND ASIA

The following is a sampling of countries and their civil wedding requirements. The embassy or nearest consulate of each country can supply more detailed information, including a list of documents that must be produced. Caribbean and Bahamas

The Bahamas: Application for a license from the Registrar General's office can be made in person or by mail. There is a two-week residency requirement for each partner (including two days in Nassau, which is the only town where the wedding can take place), although it is possible to waive the requirement by writing for the license at least two weeks before the ceremony. The fee: \$20.

French West Indies: (St. Barts, Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Martin). At least one partner must have lived on the island of choice for a month, and a medical certificate from any doctor (dated no earlier than three months before the wedding) is required. Also needed are a certificate of good conduct and a certification of single status, both of which can be obtained from the United States Consulate in Martinique. All documents, which must also include a birth certificate or a copy with a raised seal, must be translated into French. An island residency card is needed and can be obtained from the prefecture or subprefecture of the island. Witnesses are required, and a religious ceremony may only be performed after a civil ceremony.

Jamaica: Just about every hotel in Jamaica will put the couple in touch with a marriage officer - a judge, Justice of the Peace, registrar or clergyman - and will apply for the license. There is a 24-hour residency requirement. Documents needed include a birth certificate and a copy of the decree if either partner has been divorced. Two witnesses are required. Hotels will usually charge a fee of \$100 to \$150. The license costs \$27.

U.S. Virgin Islands: (St. Thomas, St. Croix, St. John). Applications are obtained from the Territorial Court of the Virgin Islands in Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas and must be signed before a notary public. A county clerk's certificate must also be attached to the application verifying that the commission of the notary public has not expired. After receipt of the application (plus a \$25 fee), there is an eight-day waiting period while the application is posted for public inspection (although this period can be waived by a local judge). The judge's fee for the ceremony is an additional \$50. Europe

France: All marriages in France must be performed by a civil authority before any clergy

can perform a religious ceremony. There is a 30-day residency requirement for at least one member of the couple before the banns can be posted, and then there is a 10-day waiting period before the wedding can take place.

A medical certificate is required before the posting of the banns, and this can be done in the United States if the certificate is stamped and the doctor's information translated by the French Embassy in Washington or the nearest French Consulate.

West Germany: As in France, a civil ceremony must precede any religious ceremony. A certificate of registration for the marriage is required from one of four offices in Hamburg, Munich, Baden-Baden or West Berlin. A waiting period of two weeks is necessary between applying for the certificate and the marriage.

Greece: Marriage licenses are obtainable from the town hall where the wedding will take place or from the clergyman who will perform the ceremony. Greek law forbids the religious marriage of a Christian to a non-Christian and Christian weddings require religious counseling or proof from the couple's own clergy that such counseling has taken place in the United States.

Banns must be posted at least two days before the couple can apply for a license, and there's a one-week waiting period after submitting the application. Roman Catholics wishing a religious wedding are not required to post banns but must submit to a four-day waiting period.

After receiving the license, another application must be completed at the mayor's office. Two witnesses are required, one of whom must be able to act as an interpreter. To be legally valid, the marriage must also be registered with the local office of vital statistics after the wedding.

Italy: The couple should go to the nearest Italian Consulate with four witnesses, who must not be related to each other, and obtain a certificate of their intention to marry. The cost varies with the dollar-lira exchange rate and is currently \$12.16. Birth certificates and any divorce papers must be translated. In Italy the couple must obtain a certificate of their single status from a United States Consulate. Arrangements can then be made at a local city or town hall.

Sweden: Couples must declare in writing at the local parish civil registration office that they are not related to each other and have not been married before. A divorced person must present a copy of the decree. Although there is no waiting period or residency requirement, paperwork may take a few days. The Swedish Foreign Ministry has a copy of requirements for a marriage license for each of the 50 states. If the couples satisfies those requirements they will receive a certificate of eligibility, which is then taken to the parish office. Fee: \$11.

Britain: Both partners must have resided in England or Wales for 15 days before a notice of intent to marry is filed with a registrar. The registrar will then issue a certificate and license and the marriage may take place one day later and within three months of the filing. Further information: General Register Office, St. Catherines House, 10 Kingsway, London WC2B 6JP, England.

In Scotland, there is no residency requirement and the couple can apply in person or by mail to the registrar for the district in which the marriage is to take place. The notice should be filed four to six weeks before the wedding but not later than 15 days before the ceremony. Further information: General Register Office, New Register House, Edinburgh EH1 3YT, Scotland. Asia

Japan: Although there is no residency requirement, couples must apply for a certificate of temporary alien registration at the office of the local government where the wedding will take place (costing \$7.57).

The application for marriages is obtainable for \$12 at the United States Embassy, where the wedding must take place in order to be legal (although a second ceremony may take place afterwards at a church, shrine or hotel). For hotel receptions in high season (spring and fall), it is wise to reserve space from 12 to 18 months in advance. If either partner is divorced a decree must be presented to the embassy. If either partner is widowed a death

certificate is required before the wedding can take place.

Thailand: The wedding can take place the same day the application is made to the local Registration Office. However, a divorced woman must wait 310 days before remarrying (supposedly to assure she is not pregnant by her former husband). The fee is about 20 cents. - K. K.

After the 15-minute ceremony in Oia, on Santorini, musicians accompany the author and her husband through the streets (Arthur Friedlander)

 FACEBOOK  TWITTER  GOOGLE+  EMAIL  SHARE