

Our big fat Breton wedding

When British couple Gabrielle and Stuart Anderson decided to get married in their adopted Brittany they discovered just how much the community has taken them to its heart, as **Mark Sampson** found out

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It's 9.30 am, late September, northern Brittany. Serge, the rotund caterer with splendid moustache and willing cohorts have swung into action, so Stuart can stop pacing and get himself ready. Gabrielle, meanwhile, his bride-to-be, is adding the finishing touches to her outfit.

By ten, the distressingly pink skewered pig is turning on the spit. The British guests mill about expectantly. Most of them seem to have come over from Brighton, where Stuart and Gabrielle met comparatively recently on the site of a community ecological building project.

Suddenly the limpid air of the countryside is rent by the wedding march played on a *bombarde*: a native reed instrument that sounds like a clarinet in pain. Notoriously hard to play, they can reputedly induce cerebral haemorrhage.

The music is emanating from the instruments of members of the Cercle Poudouvre de Quévert, the group of musicians and dancers that has welcomed Gabrielle and her fiddle into their midst. Everyone chats about the big bash to come. Brittany weather is notoriously changeable, but the sun is shining and we feel blessed. What a beautiful day for a multi-cultural variation on a traditional Breton wedding.

Half an hour to go and we are itching



to march. Big Tab, an old friend of the bride, resembles some fearsome warrior in his ancestral kilt, earrings and army boots. Gabrielle emerges like an exotic butterfly from the converted hangar that serves as their home till they build their straw bale house. 'Tu es belle comme un cœur, Gabrielle!' hollers Christian, who plays a kind of diatonic soprano sax with the Cercle. As beautiful as a heart...

Stuart marshals the troops. 'Right, you lot! Let's show those Frenchies what the British are really like.' And we're off at last, through the hamlet and along the flat road that leads past the cornfields to St-Maden. Around fifty of us. My whole body tingles with emotion as the musicians in their traditional finery of cummerbunds and tunics and white lacy coiffes play in unison on their hurdy-gurdies and piercing reeds. All those haunting minor keys. It's music so ancient and so... well, Celtic.

Stern assistant

The mayor is there to greet us on the steps of his *mairie*. Local motorists are happy to wait as the Cercle line up to usher the couple inside. The mayor beckons guests to squeeze into the office, to the apparent consternation of his stern assistant. Clearly touched by the occasion, he then reads through Stuart's impressive translation of

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This page: How can you fail to be charmed by the colour and traditions on display in the shop?

UPDATE

Following the exchange of vows from the civil code, ‘Mademoiselle Gabrielle Son-dares’ and ‘Monsieur Stu-art On-dare-son’ are declared man and wife. Time now for the legal documents. Stuart’s quip about prefacing his signature with ‘*lu et approuvé*’ earns the guffaws of all those privy to the foibles of French formality.

Finally, the exchange of rings and kisses. Cue mass applause, flashing cameras and much dabbing of moist eyes. We file out to a Yiddish wedding march played by Tab and Nick, another old friend, on their guitars and pass through the guard of honour formed by the Cercle’s cummerbunds. The Breton musicians then prompt strange, metronomic dancing in the street before leading the swollen procession homewards. The return journey is longer because the dancers stop periodically to repeat their routine. ‘Look at all these people!’ Gabrielle exclaims. ‘They’re all coming to our house. How scary is that?’

Back at the smallholding of the Andersons (as the united couple are now dubbed), the poor pig is noticeably less pink and it’s time for the customary *vin d’honneur* followed by a chance to take your glass and nibbles and mingle among the animated crowd. ‘They’ve thrown themselves into the French life,’ Gabrielle’s mother tells me proudly. ‘If you want to be a true local, you’ve got to do that’. Chatting to their new friends from the Cercle about the extraordinary musical instruments, someone reveals the evident truth that Breton people love to party.

Yet it’s true what I have heard: local acquaintances not invited for the meal instinctively know exactly when to put their glasses down and slope off. Lunch under the agricultural lean-to is a chance for the Brits to chinwag and for the French to appreciate and evaluate the pork and trimmings à la moustachioed Serge. Many are the bemused asides about the cranky Brits who forego such pleasures of the flesh for Gabrielle’s vegetarian options.

Pyramid of profiteroles

After the cheese course, Tab and Nick – with Christian on his quasi-soprano – are leading choruses of *The Wild Rover*, until it’s time to despoil the stunning *pièce montée* or pyramid of profiteroles delivered in a trailer by the local confectioner. Traditionally, the bride and groom remove the top two pastries. Stuart calls in jest for a trusty French Opinel pocket-knife. ‘You ain’t got an ‘ope in ‘ell, mate!’ retorts a quick-witted wag.

Champagne glasses are charged for the speeches. It’s typical of an evident attention to detail that Stuart delivers his bilingually in parallel paragraphs. ‘*Ma femme et je...*’ provokes a chorus of cat-calls. It seems that Paul, his neighbour and witness, has mischievously misled him. Of course it’s ‘*moi!*’ Following Gabrielle’s speech, the French contingent incites a matrimonial kiss with chants of ‘*vive, vive la mariée! Le marié doit l’embrasser!*’ Stuart breaks ▶



Gabrielle emerges like an exotic butterfly from the converted hangar that serves as their home till they build their straw bale house

his ‘background’ notes: Leaving ‘Briggaton’ and his new *amoureuse*, Stuart spent a ‘miserable winter’ alone in a damp mill in Haute-Vienne, while Gabrielle stayed behind for her daughter’s final year of school. Once reunited, the couple toured France to find the most conducive location for their smallholding dreams. Brittany seemed ‘lively and welcoming’ and, resolving ‘to become Bretons themselves’, they settled in La Haute Houssais, ‘along with their sheep, pigs, goats and chickens, welcomed by their new neighbours and thoroughly at home’.

However, I know how assiduously the pair has worked at integration and there is a fitting round of applause to accompany a note of thanks from the village schoolteacher to Gabrielle, her periodic voluntary *assistante*, for her ‘devotion, kindness, smiles and good humour’.

Stuart and Gabrielle's tips for successful cultural integration

■ You have to learn the language. Everything follows from this. Don't give up; you will improve

■ You can learn a lot about your new culture by joining one of the many associations on offer – even if it's only a rambling group

■ Consider some form of voluntary work. It will earn you considerable respect in the community and help with the language

■ Exploit the *apéritif* convention. It doesn't commit you to a meal, but makes you converse in French – if you resist the temptation to invite fellow Brits as a safety net

■ Keep an open mind and be curious. Don't be judgemental; there's so much to learn from other people and other traditions

This page, right:

Suspended glass birds catch the light beautifully

Below: Kim has been

welcomed to the

Opposite page: Visitors to

the shop and workshop can see Jean-Pierre and Kim at work

crafting the stunning pieces for sale in the showroom

off to read out his mother's text message with the Arsenal result.

Perhaps it's the prevalent *joie de vivre*, but there seems no discernible gap before the evening party begins. The mayor and his wife are there among a crowd that's bigger than ever before. Gabrielle's new mates from Les Gourganès, another local musical association, arrive and she joins them to sing their ribald Breton sea shanties as they shuffle rhythmically around a roaring bonfire that's warding off the nocturnal chill. When Christian puts his soprano down for a breather, I manage to collar him about cultural integration. If, as he suggests, the Sandersons have managed it so successfully, what is their secret? *'Il faut sourire et s'ouvrir'*, he tells me – which translates, prosaically, as 'you have to smile and be open'.

I know myself that it's not quite as simple. Astride our straw bales, I chat to Gabrielle about the obstacles she has encountered. 'I miss my mother and my daughter, of course. And when I came here, at first I just felt invisible. I'd been someone before, and suddenly I was no one. But that changes. The hardest thing is the language. I know I'm making progress, but I worry that I can't be a real friend to my new girlfriends till I can really express myself.'

A firework display interrupts us. After one particularly pyrotechnic rocket, Stuart steps into the adjacent enclosure to check on 'the Boys': their pair of pint-sized Kune Kune pigs from New Zealand. The torchlight reveals them still rooting around unperturbed. As guests drift away, Nick and Tab lead renditions of English folk songs. A French friend of Gabrielle's joins in expertly on her accordion. Later, as I slip off to my tent, I observe the two girlfriends in animated conversation and am reassured about Gabrielle's confessed struggle with self-expression.

'Such a perfect day.' It was the best of British and the best of French. We showed them our best qualities and they showed us theirs. The next day, Stuart and Gabrielle would open their presents from British friends. The next week, they would travel to Barcelona courtesy of the customary monetary contributions from French friends.

It might have been less administratively onerous to marry in the UK, but the Andersons wanted to get married at home – and Brittany is their chosen home. The affection in which their adoptive community holds them is touching and genuine. They've worked hard to achieve much in a short period and, if the sun shone blissfully all day long, then it was nothing more than they merited. ❖

