

A wedding that took place recently in Stomio near Larissa between a Greek speaker who lives in Japan and a Japanese national who lived amongst the Greek community in Melbourne.



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A Greek Australian Japanese wedding in Stomio, Greece

It's the phone call that I had waited years to receive... 'Billy, I'm getting married.' Then the line went dead. A few moments later, George had called again to explain that he would be getting married in a matter of weeks in Stomio, Greece.

Billy Cotsis

George Manetakis has been my best friend since we first met in detention at primary school. As he often recalls, 'We lost years of lunch-times, but gained even more years of friendship in return.' He moved to the 'land of no frappe', Japan, in 2002 and quickly mastered the language and the customs. So much so that at one stage he became somewhat of a celebrity in Kitakata, Miyazaki Prefecture, as locals and media were fascinated by his Greek-Australian background.

Unable to let go of his three-way love affair between Greece, Australia and Japan, George made the decision to work at the Australia Embassy in Tokyo. This allowed him to live an 'Australia by day, Japan by night' lifestyle, whilst making an annual trip to Greece.

It also gave him the opportunity to meet one, Maiko Ikemi, the lady who would be his future wife. They met at the Embassy in Tokyo on the night of the Beijing Olympics on August 8, 2008. His Greek charm won her heart in an instant...or so he likes to believe.

Maiko confided to me that she was taken aback by the initial topic of conversation: 'You can probably tell by looking at my nose that I've got a Greek background. Would you like to buy a ticket to the Embassy's Summer

Night party?' She added, 'I was impressed by his nose – his profile was reminiscent of the statues of Moai on Easter Island – but I couldn't commit to buying a ticket just yet.'

The melding of cultures on that night was to prove an interesting narrative. Even though Maiko had spent four years in that ultimate paradigm of the Greek Diaspora, Melbourne, her interest in Greece had yet to be piqued.

A year-long courtship with George and multiple viewings of 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding', was to change that, and prepare her for the unexpected in S-

tomio.

The Wedding

The marriage Maiko and George in Stomio was a triumph of firsts: the first Japanese national to get married and baptised there, and the first time a Greek wedding was 'small' – with only 50 close friends and relatives in attendance. So how did a marriage of two ancient cultures play out? I decided to let Maiko put into her own words by interviewing her about the wedding, her thoughts about Greece, Greek food and more.

Where in Japan are you from?

I am from Chiba Prefecture, next to Tokyo.

Are there many Greek speakers in Japan?

Hardly any, I suspect. Apart from my trip to the Greek Embassy in Tokyo, I've never come across any Greeks in Japan.

Why are you still with George (laughs)?

I think seeing the size of his stomach growing and growing is quite interesting – I'm curious to see if it'll ever stop.

Did you know much about Greece and the Greek culture before you met George?

No, but since meeting George I have bought a number of Greek cooking books, and I enjoy making Greek food. I also recently finished reading a book on Greek myths.

What was your impression of Greece - especially Stomio, which is largely unknown to most Greeks?

I found Greek people to be very energetic, but at the same time very laid back. I was surprised to see how much importance they place on enjoying life.

The historical sites were very impressive in Athens and other parts of Greece such as Meteora.

As for Stomio, what I really enjoyed were the little things such as having lunch right by the sea, eating fresh bread each day for breakfast from the bakery next door, taking my time drinking frappe at the beach...also having the beach and mountains next to each other is really amazing.

Did Greece meet your expectations?

It was much better than I expected. Greece is the complete opposite to Japan in many respects, and it was a real eye opener. In Japan, people tend to stick to the rules, while in Greece, people seem happy to just make them up as they go along. (I think this frustrated George, but I enjoyed myself.)

How did you react when you found out about being christened?

It wasn't a big deal for me to get baptised. Actually, it was a happy occasion as I saw it as part of the process of becoming part of George's family, and my parents also saw it in this light, too. I was a little unsure how I would feel about adopting a Greek name [Cleo], but the priest put my mind at ease by always referring to me as 'Maiko-Cleo'.

Did you enjoy the experience?

I did! I only wish they had gotten a bigger tub for me to sit in when the priest poured water over me. It reminded of my 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding' – so I knew what was going to happen.

How was the wedding?

Stomio

Stomio is somewhat of a hidden paradise. Getting there is no easy task, only four buses a day run from Larissa, and the tree-lined coastline betrays no hint that the village is home to some of the best beaches in Greece. Apart from weekend beachgoers from Larissa and small tourist groups from Poland, its existence remains largely unknown.

It is nestled in between the Aegean Sea and lush forested mountains that house a number of monasteries. Hidden and tucked away with a population of 624 people, it was built on the site of the ancient town of Evrymenes. It is the birthplace of Greek poet Dimitris Kraniotis, and the effervescence of its people and numerous tavernas and cafenios prevent it from becoming another sleepy village. Every year for the last several years I have made my way to Stomio; there is something about a good pareo, frothy frappe, beach bars that play tunes from the 80's and quality food (calamari at Tasso's Taverna is a must) that draws me there. Though I always leave with the promise to my hosts that I won't be back, I am never lost for an excuse to return. This year, I had the best reason yet to make my way back there: being best man at the most international of weddings as best man.

And besides the exceptional welcome I receive from the extended Manetakis family, who I have known for 25 years, its always worth the trip. Everyone seems to go out of their way to make the visit special, be it from staying with Angela and Spiro (sister of George and her husband) or having a home cooked meal with people I have met over the years is an experience I cherish, especially when I spend most of the year in London.