



YOUR COUNTRY OR MINE?

FALLING IN LOVE WITH A FOREIGNER MAY SOUND ROMANTIC BUT THE HAPPILY-EVER-AFTER PART CAN BE COMPLICATED, WRITES LIBBY HAKIM.

Long-distance love: (above) Sydney-born Sophie Alize Finnane and Cuban Yoel Carlos Del Rio Olivera.

Globalisation, the internet and our never-ending appetite for overseas travel have increased the odds of stumbling upon love of the very-long-distance variety.

And when that holiday fling or internet romance becomes serious, an inevitable dilemma arises: who will make the big move?

Counselling psychotherapist Dr Karen Phillip says deciding which country to live in is not easy – the issues can re-emerge as couples navigate the ups and downs of the relationship through various life stages.

Even where lifestyle, political or other factors make one country the obvious choice, the dilemma is still real. “There’s the matter of cultural difference, and family can never really be replaced. It is

a heavy burden to carry when we live so far apart.” However, she says, with “openness, trust, understanding and unconditional love” – and technology such as Skype – the couple can make it.

Sydney → Santiago de Cuba: 15,168 kilometres

Sophie Alize Finnane, 34, of Sydney, found love with Yoel Carlos Del Rio Olivera, 32, in 2012 while holidaying in the Cuban city of Trinidad de Cuba.

“My friend and I had been talking about going to Cuba for 10 years. She’s an artist and I’m a dancer – we wanted to see all the colour. We’d both had a hard year and decided to just go.

We were having dinner in a restaurant in Trinidad de Cuba and Yoel was one of the musicians. We met up a

night later and danced until the early hours of the morning. The morning that I woke up with him, I had this odd sensation that everything in the world was perfect; it was almost other-worldly. He gave me a gold ring which really freaked me out, but I accepted it.

I was really confused when I left Cuba. It was hard to know if it was a holiday romance or more than that. I wanted a chance to figure that out.

It took nine months to get Yoel here on a tourist visa; it was an incredibly difficult process. We got engaged within a few months and started to do the paperwork for him to stay.

We both just assumed from the beginning that he would live with me in Sydney. It just made sense. I couldn’t live in a socialist country. It’s very closed and you don’t realise

"This relationship and everything I went through, it's really pushed my boundaries personally. I'd never had to fight so hard for anything."

how free you are until you go somewhere like that. Yoel was pretty curious to see the world and get out of Cuba. At no point has it been easy for him, though.

It was a weird reality check when he first arrived. I'd be away 10 hours at work and he'd be at home by himself with no family, just on the internet. He was really lost. Some days I'd just want to meet up with a girlfriend but I couldn't really leave him. It was awkward. It got to a point where I felt like I hadn't had two seconds to myself.

He found it very stressful, getting used to the fast-paced and capitalist-driven Western world, but he is really grateful and proactive about the opportunities he has here. He now goes to school two nights a week to better his English. He's working as a labourer and is passionate about photography and videography; he now gets paid to do that, too.

We got married on New Year's Eve, 2013. This relationship and everything I went through, it's pushed my boundaries personally. I'd never had to fight so hard for anything. It stretched me massively financially – I ended up spending about \$20,000 getting him here.

I hate it when he misses home. It makes me wonder if one day he will miss it too much and not want to be here with me anymore.

Yoel wants to visit home every year. We don't have kids yet but as our family grows it's going to be more and more expensive. It means every holiday is to Cuba, and we can't travel to other places and explore. But I totally understand that.

He's said a few times that maybe one day we'll stay in Cuba for six months. I'm up for spending a chunk of time there, but we couldn't just move back there. It would be too difficult after growing up in a free country such as Australia."

Photograph by Andrew Goldie, Sophie and Yoel photographed at The Lobo Plantation, Sydney, thelobo.com.au



Sydney → Tel Aviv:
14,192 kilometres

Ravit Danieli-Vlandis, 40, met an Australian, Bill Vlandis, 41, in her Israeli hometown, Tel Aviv, in 2000 – and the pair instantly clicked.

"I met Bill when I was working in a kiosk on a busy street in Tel Aviv. He was a backpacker and the first Australian I'd ever met. It was a struggle with the accent, half the time I didn't know what he was saying. But we just clicked straight away.

After two months of seeing each other, we decided to live together. We realised

we were soul mates quite early on. Bill went to my father and asked for my hand in marriage. The next day when I went to see my parents, they were hysterical. My parents were sure one day he'd go back to Australia and they'd be left with me to pick up the pieces.

Bill and I both decided that I should move to Sydney. It was an obvious choice. It was never nice in Israel because you live in fear. Bill would have faced many hardships there and would have found it difficult to get a good job. Because he's not Jewish, no one would have married us. Bill would not consider converting to Judaism, he doesn't believe in religion.

It was difficult for me to leave as my parents didn't want me to go and were very worried. They begged me to buy a two-way ticket.

The first few days after I arrived I was in shock. I was too scared to leave the house on my own. In the beginning, it put a lot of pressure on the relationship as I was very dependent on my husband socially. I thought my English was good but my confidence dropped

when I had to pick up the telephone and look for jobs. The first job I found was in a bottle shop, which I didn't really like. I eventually found a job working in administration at a university. I've been there five years now and absolutely love it.

The most difficult thing is being away from my family. Whenever I go back and see my parents, I realise how much they've aged. It's always a shock. I never know when will be the last time I see them.

Once I became pregnant with my first child, I felt sad that they would not be a big part of my kids' lives. But I also started forming better connections here when I had kids. And our three kids now Skype with their grandparents weekly.

We visited Israel two years ago and six years before that. The kids loved it. I want my kids to know where I come from and share the things I used to do in Israel as a child. But I wouldn't want them going through compulsory army service like I did, and experiencing the stuff that happens in Israel."



Brisbane → The Hague:
16,262 kilometres

Renée Veldman-Tentori, 39, from Brisbane, swapped email addresses with a Dutch traveller on Fraser Island, and the rest was history.

"When I met my Dutch husband in 2001, he was travelling around Australia. We organised to meet up in London the next year and have been a couple ever since.

When I first moved to the Netherlands it was absolutely exciting; we were madly in love. We'd talked about eventually moving to Australia and living happily ever after near the beach; that was what I thought was our joint dream.

To keep my visa, I had to attend compulsory Dutch language classes for a year. I'd go and sit in the bathroom

and cry, I found it so difficult. My work opportunities were limited – education is valued extremely highly in the Netherlands and I didn't have a degree.

We ended up returning to Australia to settle, as planned, in 2007. My parents met our five-month-old daughter for the first time at the airport. I still get goosebumps thinking about it.

The day we landed in Australia, my husband started going through all the same things I'd been through. He missed his family and hated the heat. His personality changed.

Each year, his parents came to stay with us for a month. Each time they returned, I knew he wished he was going back, too. Finally, after their fourth visit, he told me that he wanted to return. We had two daughters by this stage and it made me anxious to even think about telling my parents.

I didn't want to go back but I thought he'd given it a go in Australia, so I agreed. Within a week of planning the move, I started having severe anxiety and panic attacks. I went through counselling and started on anti-depressants.

It was a very tough personal decision but having kids made the decision to move back to the Netherlands one I made for the family. The counsellor helped me see it as the best decision

for my family, even though for me it wasn't the best decision.

The moment we landed at Schiphol [Amsterdam's airport], I cried. Moving to another country, when it's not really what you want to do, leaves you totally empty. But then you begin again.

We bought a house on the border between beautiful Delft and The Hague. I love walking down streets that people have walked down for hundreds of years and we can get in our car and drive through four countries in one day. The girls are thriving at a local Dutch school and are bilingual.

I started to blog before I left. I write and connect with others who are going through a similar thing; that's helped me to cope. I stopped taking anti-depressants a year after the move, I have re-started my business and am about to start a master's at The Hague University.

I'm constantly homesick. I miss my family. I miss the weather. I try to holiday in Australia every year but it's difficult with the schooling system here. I've got Vegemite and Tim Tams in the cupboard – it's just this bond I have with Australia.

We're trying to raise our daughters as world citizens. It's not realistic to expect we'll live our life in one country. We've got to come up with the coping skills to deal with that." ●