



Planning the perfect day

There is so much stress and so many pitfalls in organising a wedding that getting someone else to do it is not as crazy or indulgent as it might appear

WORDS TILLY CALDWELL-SPENCER

If I'm honest, I had been planning this wedding since I was 13. Wearing a gorgeous designer gown, I floated down the aisle on my father's arm towards my handsome prince charming. In those days I hadn't imagined he'd be sporting a kilt, but this only added to the fairytale as Hamish and I were married in a 300-year-old stone chapel in the Highlands.

We woke up on the big day to a fresh dusting of snow, the final touch to 12 months of frantic organising. I've always been a planner, teased by my friends as someone who plans to make a plan. I knew I could create the perfect wedding.

And so it was; the wedding guests all flew in a day early and, hugely excited, met that night in front of a roaring log fire. Our photographers clicked away that evening and the next morning as the bridesmaids and I got ready. The guests started walking to the chapel, the classic cars crunched up the drive and we were off. I tried to not to think about the endless detail I had built into the itinerary (best man to meet the cars, corsages pinned at 1030, piper picked up at 1100, cars set off at 1115) and instead focus on my vows but there was so much going on at the same time.



We were married in a chapel that had taken months to discover. It was quite simply perfect. Then Hamish and I were whisked off to the reception. The hard part was over. It was time to see everyone, laugh at the speeches and have the first dance I'd decided on all those years ago.

Our choice for the reception had been a real challenge as we'd fallen in love with a castle with no electricity. As a result, we had to create the venue like a marquee: catering, furniture, dance floors all from scratch. But the effect was perfect and the place had a real wow factor.

As the speeches ended, my head emptied of itineraries, planning and timings. I was floating on the sea of smiles around me. I was so happy with the way the day had turned out. Then, as Hamish and I stepped on to the dance floor, there was a sudden split second of silence when the background hum of the generator stopped and everything turned black.

Initially, a wave of giggles rippled across the room – everyone suspected the best man had pulled the plug as a final tease at my planning. But as 30 seconds of darkness turned into a minute and then two, we realised there was a serious problem. Six months before, I had read several party planning manuals and, following their advice, had over-compensated by booking a huge generator. Having booked a local company from the yellow pages, I re-confirmed a month beforehand and then forgot about it. Of course, it was only after the wedding that people told me how important

it was to use a well-known company – loss of power is an absolute showstopper at any event. I knew nothing of back-up generators.

We were lucky that night. One of our guests was a soldier and a dab hand at this sort of thing. As the third minute of muffled chattering rolled into four (and my grip on Hamish's arm tightened), Donald slipped outside, rolled up his sleeves and got to work. A few candles were lit around the bar, large whiskies were poured and 30 minutes later the lights flicked on and Elton John's 'Your Song' flowed out, loud and clear. We recovered the evening, just.

In the many years since, I have heard all kinds of stories from other 'perfect planners' who overlooked some vital element.

One great friend, who also planned her own wedding, nearly didn't get married because of a simple wrong turn. Like me, she'd spent months selecting a cake, flowers, venue, photographers, food etc. She later told me the easiest part had been asking a family friend if he would drive her to the church in his old Bentley. It's amusing to hear her husband's version now. As he stood at the altar waiting for the bride to arrive, joking with his best man, the first five minutes didn't worry him. After ten minutes, he was still relaxed, expecting his future wife was hovering just outside the church having some fun at his expense. Fifteen minutes passed; sweat appeared on his forehead. With still no sign of Lucy after 20 minutes, the groom was very worried indeed. Finally, 25 minutes late,

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they arrived, just as the minister was about to cancel and start preparing the church for the next wedding. It transpired that the family friend had taken several wrong turns and there was no signal to phone with a warning. No one had thought to recce the route.

My friend later attended a reception that was delayed by 40 minutes. Only one of two pre-arranged buses had turned up to collect guests. Catering timings were thrown out and some very expensive food was ruined.

Worse was to follow at an English country-house wedding not so long ago. This was wedding with the best of all things: flowers flown in from Holland, a fleet of classic cars, Pol Roger sipped from Swarovski flutes. But it was the bride's Versace wedding gown that caught most eyes; finished to perfection, she glided down the aisle, radiant, elegant and gorgeous.

For their wedding cake, however, the couple had decided to accept the kind invitation of favourite Aunt Elspeth, who had always baked treats for Catherine when she was a young girl. Treats and wedding cakes are two very different things, though, as we discovered when the bride and groom began to cut the cake, and the entire five-tier construction tipped up, collapsing all over Catherine and her stunning dress. Endless measurements and four months of fittings, all ruined.

Then, last December, we went to my niece Jenny's wedding in Yorkshire. She and Tom had planned everything, even arranging a pre-wedding dinner so everyone would get there safely the night before. Jenny had left nothing to fate – she wasn't even surprised when it snowed solidly all night and we woke up to a winter wonderland. It was for precisely this reason that we'd told to arrive a day early and to bring wellies! Everything continued as planned. Stomping through the snow on the five-minute walk to the church, there was a wonderfully crisp and festive atmosphere all around. But there was a problem: the church was quiet and locked.

The next 20 minutes were frantic as the best man tried to locate the

minister. Eventually we learned he'd got stuck in the snow on his way home the night before. As the snow kept falling, no one could move for two days without a 4x4. The marriage was postponed but the party went ahead in the hotel as planned (an iPod replaced the band who also couldn't get there). When they did finally tie the knot two months later, Jenny and Tom couldn't justify the cost of another big bash and sadly it was only family who saw them get married.

These days, the next generation in our family is starting to get married. Each month, another invitation lands on our doorstep to support nieces, nephews and godchildren commit to their loved ones the way Hamish and I did all those years ago. One big thing has changed for the better since we got married – the wedding co-ordinator. Such things didn't exist then – or, if they did, they were the preserve of the very wealthy.

I was at another wedding in the north of Scotland last winter not long after Jenny's catastrophe, only much colder and with deeper snow. I was worried we'd have the same problem. Instead, the day went without a hitch, ran to perfect time and felt like no other wedding I'd ever been to; there was no confusion or hanging about and the food, flowers, music and entertainment were all phenomenal – all this in four foot of snow! Chatting with the bride's mother that night, I asked her how she'd done it. A smile spread across her face and she simply said, LITU.

LITU (short for Leave it to Us), I later learned, are a Scottish wedding consultancy owned and run by Kimmie and George Brown. They have planned, managed and run weddings for 15 years for hundreds of couples. Faced with my daughter's recent engagement, I realised I'd struck gold: Kimmie and George are planning Nicky's wedding next summer. If only they had been around for Hamish and me – I could have enjoyed my day without the worry of timings, itineraries and tasks!

Having operated discreetly behind the scenes for a number of celebrity weddings in Scotland, the couple are no strangers to taking a dream and turning it into reality – we're watching ours develop before our eyes.

Oh, that recent wedding in the north of Scotland: the minister, piper and hairdresser got stuck in the snow that morning – but LITU had a fleet of 4x4 vehicles on standby and simply bashed their way through. ☺

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